

“Some thoughts on The Campaign Against Anti-Semitism Rally”

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

Sunday, 31st August was a beautiful summer day in London, and I was ambling down the Strand. To the casual passer-by I probably looked as if I didn't have a care in the world. How wrong could one be? In fact I was worn down with anxiety that, for the first time in my seventy-four years, I felt obliged to attend a rally to campaign against the growing manifestations of anti-Semitism in this country, and beyond.

All sorts of thoughts began to jostle in my mind. They were sparked by the advertisements, on the walls of the tube's escalators, enlisting support for the children of Gaza. I reflected, for the umpteenth time, on why it was only the victims of an Israeli-Jewish battle that elicited such compassion, support and demonstrations, whereas the millions of victims of Muslim aggression in so many countries world-wide did not merit any such grass-roots response. For some reason my mind went back to my childhood, and conversations I'd had with my grandfather who had fled the anti-Semitism and pogroms in Russia around 1900 to find freedom in these shores.

This led, naturally, to reminiscences about Rosa Tureck, the lovely teenage kinder-transport refugee who had come to live with us just before the war, in 1939, and who, as a little child, I had assumed was my sister. That was until her sole surviving uncle sent a cable, insisting that she come to live with him in America. (My parents were in the process of adopting her when that message arrived, and it took my mother ages to get over her absence).

I mused about the tolerant Methodist Junior school I had attended in Manchester, but where, each day, in the playground, I, a five-year old, was punched by the school bully and told, 'Go back to your own land!' He could only have picked up that antipathy from his home!

I thought about the euphoria that we had all experienced after Israel's amazing victory in the Six Days war, and how, walking down Baker Street with a fellow Jews' College student, we had been greeted by non-Jews and congratulated! And then I thought of the tens of thousands of pro-Palestinian Muslims who demonstrated for Gaza recently, in London and Paris, carrying placards with such obscene slogans as 'Hitler was right!', 'Death to the Jews' and ' Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas', while the police looked on impassively, taking no action against such criminal incitement to racial hatred. And I thought of the refusal of The Tricycle Theatre to accept an event with Israeli patronage, and other such expressions of discrimination, including George Galloway's attempt make Bradford *Judenrein!*

I thought about our brethren in France, subjected to an even more vicious physical and emotional onslaught, with Jews being besieged in synagogues, and other Jewish buildings fire-bombed, prompting Jews in their tens of thousands to flee the country over recent years. And I thought of countries like Holland, a centuries-old haven for Jews, and Sweden and Finland, with their tiny Jewish communities, yet viewing those Jews as a threat, prompting them to make common cause with Muslim extremism to adopt an anti-Semitic posture. I thought how readily some European countries during the Second World War had embraced the Nazis' anti-Jewish measures and collaborated in the massacre of Jews.

And then I thought of my grandchildren's generation, and their grim campus struggle against extremism, in the form of verbal and physical anti-Semitic attacks, anti-Israel Union motions, campus invitations to Palestinian speakers who seek to whip up anti-Israel vituperation, and their withdrawal of invitations to pro-Israel spokesmen. I thought of the picketing of Israeli and Jewish-owned shops and the concerted effort to achieve boycotts, sanctions and divestment of Israeli products, as well as the concerted efforts in several countries to ban Shechitah and circumcision. And I thought of the many reports I was hearing of Jewish parents and children being insulted at Park gates and outside places of entertainment, of the graffiti, and the vitriol that is swirling through the social media.

So, would that 'casual passer-by' ever have imagined that I was being weighed down by such dark thoughts? And if he or she had been privy to them, would they really empathize with our problems? I very much doubted it as I walked, down-hearted, to the rally.

But, by the time I had retraced my steps, a few hours later, my spirits were considerably raised, by the presence of some 4000 people at the rally, the inspirational addresses, the sympathetic hooting of passing traffic, and the Jewish cabbies with Israeli flags draped over their windows. Above all, I was heartened by the sense of unity and 'never again' determination that characterized the mood of the vast, and representative, gathering.

It may have been naïve, and mathematics is far from my metier, but I did take heart from the following calculation: If the figure of 8000 recent demonstrators for Gaza is accurate, out of a total of two million Muslims in this country, this suggests approximately 0.4% of the latter. This percentage is probably lower since it includes members of the UK's extreme right wing who made common cause with the Muslim extremist demonstrators). Compare that with 4000 Jews, out of a total of some 250,000, turning up to affirm that we will not tolerate such a situation, and we arrive at some 1.6%. Bearing in mind that this was a hastily organised rally and that so many Jews were still away on holiday, and the disparity becomes even more wide. This told me that the situation was not all that hopeless, and that we can hope that the Muslim community itself will help to suppress the small proportion of extremists within its ranks. Certainly the government's determination to suppress such extremism, and to take action against British jihadists, who go to fight in Syria and elsewhere, is an encouraging step, one that must now vigorously be taken up, as both a political philosophy and a practical program, by politicians of all parties, by the judiciary, the police and the nation.

Several speakers rightly broadened the agenda to include the fight against Islamophobia, racism and bigotry of any kind. No minority or individual should suffer discrimination, attack or insult on account of their colour, religion, life-style or politics, as long as their views do not run counter to the ideal of peace and racial harmony. Indeed, the rally was joined by a number of non-Jews who came to embrace those very ideals and demonstrate their solidarity. It was not without significance that on that very day, the newspapers reported on some Mullahs in this country who had issued a fatwa against any Muslim who resorts to violence or extremist activity. Let us hope that such a move will gain momentum throughout Europe, the Middle East, and, indeed, the entire Islamic world. Sadly, these are lone, albeit most welcome, voices, and those religious leaders need to take a firm line and a strong hand against the violent men (and women) in their midst, and not hold back from reporting them to the police.

This rally was a most impressive and powerful demonstration of our community's commitment to this important issue. It was also a demonstration of unity, with speakers from across the various religious denominations, including the Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Joseph Dweck of the Sephardi community, the religious leaders of the Masorti, Reform and Liberal communities (Alas, no one from the Charedi community!). Speeches were also given by Mandy Blumenthal, US President Stephen Pack, Holocaust survivor Gena Turgel, writer Douglas Murray and Maajid Nawaz of the counter extremism think tank Quilliam. They were introduced by the Rally organiser Gideon Falter from the Campaign Against Antisemitism.

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis pointed out that the day before we had read from the sidrah Shoftim, containing the clarion call, *tzedek tzedek tirdof*, 'justice, justice shall you pursue,' and that it was significant that the rally was being held in front of The Royal Courts of Justice'. The message, he pointed out, was that we Jews do not, and have never, asked for special privileges. As loyal and peace-loving citizens for over 350 years, who have played a leading part in promoting the prosperity of this country, we expect and demand, nothing more than justice. And that means that we should not live in fear of attack, vilification or discrimination, but should enjoy full protection and security. This rally amplified the message that every citizen, Jew and non-Jew alike, shared a responsibility to stand up to protect Jewish life in the UK as part of our wider refusal to tolerate any form of extremist hate crime.

This call was taken up by Stephen Pack, US President, who said: "We have to encourage the authorities to act. We are proud British Jews, we love this country and we live here because we choose to live in a tolerant and reasonable society. Yes, we have to pray, but we also have to do what we can as individuals to show we care."

It need hardly be stated that if we do nothing in the face of any unprovoked attack, or even verbal assault, we are giving encouragement to our enemies to intensify their actions. We need to intensify our vigilance, volunteer for security duties at our shuls and schools, and, if we are fit, offer our services to the CST. We need to go on the offensive in the face of any disparagement of Jews, and we need to know how to counter any insults or allegations. To do that requires a thorough knowledge of the issues and the situation in the Middle East, and our youth and students, in particular, should be seeking out such sources of information.

Once again, I congratulate the rally organisers, the inspirational speakers and all who attended. May we speedily see the fulfilment of the prophetic ideal of 'nations speaking peace unto nation...and no longer seeking training in warfare'.

I take this opportunity of wishing Rabbi and Mrs Lew and Rabbi and Mrs Shaw, the H.E.'s and all members of the Stanmore community, a happy, healthy, prosperous and, above all, a peaceful new year.

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