

JEWISH TRADITIONS AND DIALOGUE¹

MARC SCHNEIER

Rabbino del Jewish World Congress

First, I want to tell all of you how thrown I am to join you here in Florence and, particularly, to see so many young people who join us at this conference. I was profoundly a program and I see you heard more than twenty speakers today. And it reminds me of the story, to joke, that they record in New York about the Jewish community at their dinner. That was called for 6 p.m. and there were 500 people in attendance. By 7:30 they were up to the 18th speaker and maybe 150 people were left in attendance. By 8:30 they're up to the 23rd speaker and only one person, one person is left in the room. So the 24th speaker, before he begins his formal remarks he says: «Sir, I want to thank you, for your discipline, for your support in waiting to hear my speech» and the man says «What are you talking about?, I am the 26th speaker». So I am the 26th speaker here, and very honored to have been given this platform.

My friends, one of my favored references in the Bible, in the Torah, and I spoke about it last evening here in Florence, for our program with Imam Elzir and Chief Rabbi Levi, and it's a story that all of you know from the Bible. It's the story of the Exodus from Egypt. And we are told that God visited ten plagues upon the ancient Egyptians. And the ninth plague was the plague of darkness. According to the biblical commentators it was a very unusual form of darkness. It was not a darkness that affected the eyes. It was a darkness that affected the heart. That physically they were able to see, but they could not feel for each other, they do not care for one another. And that, my friends, is the most terrible plague of all. And this is our challenge. This is Judaism's challenge. In the arena of dialogue to keep a glow:

¹ Testo trascritto dall'originale, non rivisto dall'autore.

the light of understanding and caring that truly enables us to see the other. To keep a glow that wise, so that we see each and every person as a human being, who has the needs and the hopes, and the feelings and the fears, just as we do, who is a child of God just as we are. And who is entitled to be treated with the dignity, the justice and the compassion that we claim for ourselves. This is the very essence of dialogue.

I come to the arena of dialogue with a particular focus. My focus is strict relations internationally between the Muslim community and the Jewish community. In addition to our remarkable work in the United States and Canada, we have launched a campaign here in Europe to strengthen relations between our two communities and as an example, the work that Imam Elzir and Chief Rabbi Levi, and Imam Pallavicini and so many others in Italy are doing, this is serving as a profound example of keeping a glow alive of understanding and caring.

But let me caution you. I do not set the bar at dialogue. It's important to have the engagement, as we have here today, to exchange all the attitudes and all the niceties about our respective religions, but we must go beyond. We need to authenticate the dialogue. To authenticate the dialogue means fighting for the other. The Jewish people understand that a people who fight for their own rights are only as honorable as when they fights for the rights of all people. And why I'm particularly proud that the Jewish community worldwide, in North America, in South America, in Europe, how we have been in the forefront of combating islamofobia. How we have been in the leadership of combating entire Muslim discrimination. At the same time, how grateful I am to the Muslim Community, to Muslim clerks and Imams around the world, who are now speaking out against anti-Semitism. I give you a wonderful example: two months ago in the Middle East it was reported that the Palestinian organizations, Hamas and Fatah, have expressed their aversion when they learned that Palestinians children were been thought about the holocaust, about the Shoa in Gaza. When I was informed of their reaction I went to my friend in Washington, the leadership of the Islamic society of North America, which is the Federation of all Muslims in the United States and Canada. And without skipping a hardy like this the Islamic society of North America not only condemned Hamas and Fatah for their position, but the Islamic society of North America made an international appeal saying that Palestinian children must be told about the holocaust, for that all Arab children, all Muslim children must be

told about the holocaust. Because dialogue is about fighting for the other. That a people who fight for their own rights are only as honorable as when they fight for the rights of all people.

Many of you are familiar with the name of Pastor Martin Niemöller. Maybe not the young people in this audience. But Pastor Niemöller was a great person, clergymen, of Germany. And he enjoyed that status when the Nazis came to power and listen to these words of Niemöller, that he expressed after the war, when he said: «When the Nazis came to power, first they came for the Communists and I did not speak up, because I was not a Communist. And then they came for the Jews and I did not speak up, because I was not a Jew. And then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. And then they came for the Catholics and I did not speak up because I was not a Catholic. And then they came for me and there was no one left to speak up.» And he concludes the statement by stating that: «an injustice to anyone anywhere must be the concern of everyone everywhere». That, my friends, is the essence of dialogue.

Permit me to conclude with one final observation. The great English statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke once said «all that is necessary for evil to triumph is the good men to do nothing». Again, «all that is necessary for evil to triumph is the good men to do nothing». So I challenge you, here, this evening, we all know that religion has been used by some for the most evil purposes. Are we going to speak up or are we among the good people who do nothing. When suicide bombers kill innocents, men women and children, in the name of religion... are we going to speak up or are we among the good people who do nothing. When religion is misused and abused, when faith is used to demonized other people... are we going to speak up, or are we among the good people who do nothing. Then days ago American forces successfully killed Osama Bin Laden, American forces successfully afforded that evil... are we going to embrace tolerance and reject terrorism, are we going to embrace to voice of moderation and reject militancy, or are we among the good people who do nothing. All that is necessary for evil to triumph is the good men to do nothing.

So, my friends, we come full circle back to the plague of darkness. That physically they were able to see, but they do not feel for each other, they do not care for one another. So let us keep a glow: the light of understanding and caring for only when we see the humanity in another person can we preserve it within ourselves.