

Challenge or threat ?

“The Muslim and Jewish European Communities and the Challenges Ahead”

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Ladies and Gentleman,

Spending the last few days within the confinement of a conference, with representatives of the US law enforcement bodies, paying visits to the great Capitol Building in this city, spending time with the Dutch Ambassador in his residence and last but no least to be a guest of the Dutch Caucas and the Anne Frank center here in America, it is even more heartwarming to spend the Shabbos within your community. A dear friendship, which started more than 25 years ago during my rabbinical tenure in The Hague in Holland with the family Kasdan, was continued in their home today.

Ladies and gentleman, thank you very much for inviting me today to address you about a topic which occupies the minds of many Jewish community leaders in Europe today. Rabbi's and lay leaders daily address the question of how to handle the well-being of their communities, with on their door step a large Muslim population. Directors, governors, and headmasters daily concentrate on safety issues for their institutions and the communities who are in their care.

But, it is not only the concern of the Jewish public in our countries. Also , and let me concentrate on the situation in Holland, it is a great concern for the Dutch Government, the Dutch political parties, the authorities who carry the responsibility of safeguarding the good relationship between different communities.

I do admit that when I chose the title of this lecture I had some hesitations. To address the relationship between the Muslim and Jewish communities as a 'challenge' here in Washington, here in the United States is not a simple matter. Only a few miles from here the plane came down on the Pentagon, two planes destroyed thousands of lives in the heart of Manhattan, and the fourth plane came down in Shanksville in Pennsylvania. Only just over a week ago, the dramatic aftermath of the Marathon in Boston with all the uncertainties

involved. And then I come here to tell you about the 'challenge' instead of rather speaking about a 'threat.'

I would like to invite you, dear ladies and gentleman, to join me to have a look at the stimulating words of a great personality, the former Chief Rabbi of Israel Harav Israel Meijer Lau. These words were said after Rav Lau had a series of meetings during a short visit to Egypt, several years ago: "We must never lose hope of achieving peace among peoples, nations, religions and races. We achieve this peace not through the highest echelons of authority, but rather through personal contact between individuals and with humanitarian gestures. This is the true power of influence..."

It is May 2011. During the past few months, at several spots in the city of Amsterdam Jewish youngsters have been harassed. Sometimes they are verbally abused, occasionally yarmulkes are taken away. Another time children are actually threatened. The majority of these incidents are caused by Islamic youngsters with a Moroccan or Turkish background. In fact in Holland, there lives a large Muslim community from those countries whose parents and grandparents came to Holland during the seventies and the eighties of the last

century¹. The Dutch Jewish broadcasting company decides to show once and for all the public what it means to be a Jew in Holland. To show the once 'so called' Dutch tolerant society what it means to live as a Jew in our country.

Several days later two pupils of the orthodox Jewish school and myself are walking through Amsterdam neighborhoods adorned with secret camera's. At the street corner right opposite of a large market a young boy raises his right hand "Jews, Heil Hitler"!

The film images do their job. The city council is disgusted. The political parties demand an explanation of the Minister of Justice. The Public prosecutor starts his investigations . Time goes by. The political parties are once again occupied with other matters. The city council is busy with the drugs problems of the city and the investigation through the offices of the Public Prosecutor drags on and on.

Then, on a Sunday morning, Said Bensalem, a Muslim youth worker hangs on the phone. 'Please, rabbi, would you want to sit down with this boy who greeted you in such a repulsive manor. Your action with the secret camera's

¹ The total Muslim population in a city of Amsterdam is 14 %. This means a total population of 790.000 approx. 110.000

damages the relationship between our communities". We sat down, we spoke, and we tried to understand each other.

And a week later? The youngster walks with me through the secret annex of the Anne Frank House. He listens intensely to the story of the Jewish community during world war two. He holds his breath while I tell the story of my parents and my grandparents. Then we stand still, in front of the screen. The old lady, Miep Gies, one of the very brave aids of the family Frank during the time in hiding, tells her story how she, as a young girl, sustained the family in hiding with food, clothing and everything else. My Muslim was watching the film. He didn't move on. He watched it again. "Rabbi, when I was standing in the street, stretching out my hand, I thought I was cool. Now, when I stand in front of this lady, now I realise what is cool". This very same person, this Muslim, this member of the Moroccan community in Holland serves as a role model to other children, at school at the community centers.

It is March February. Street kids, Muslims, hang about at the street corners of the West side of Amsterdam. Nasty remarks are made about Jews, about Israel, about the politics of the Middle East which is beyond their apprehension.

Several weeks later. Those children, the same ones, thirty of them, work site by site with Jewish youth to restore an old Jewish cemetery. Six Sunday's in a row they turn up with their rakes, their spades, and their brushes to clear the scrubs, to remove the weeds, to clean the matseivos. Thirty Muslims, street kids made friends with the Jewish Community.

Not everyone within our own community can appreciate these efforts. Over the years a strong image forming has taken its toll. Just as well in the Jewish community as well in the Muslim community.

A class of young Jewish girls tells me in total agreement of all the pupils "All Muslims hate the Jews"! This is image forming.

In the other camp, only very recently, young Arabic boys and girls proclaimed, in front of one of the main Dutch television stations that Nazi Germany was fully justified to kill all Jews, as well as the sick and small babies. "One day", so repeated one of those kids, "one day the world would be great full for the Nazi's to have initiated the destruction of European Jewry"! Also this is image forming.

No, not everybody can appreciate the efforts I just described. Just the same as we in Holland do realize that the message I am trying to get across here, will be difficult to digest with the aftermath of 9/11 here in the States.

But let me take the matter a little bit further.

In our city of Amsterdam the total population amounts to about 790.000 inhabitants. 14 % are indeed Muslims. Recent research has shown that about 5 percent of the Muslim communities in Holland are vulnerable towards radicalization efforts. There are several factors which contribute towards this high figure. These youngsters are not listened to, they are not understood. Holland is an open permissive society, with a great lack of authority in the educational system, there is open exposure to extreme left and right policymakers, the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, the ongoing wars in Afghanistan, Syria and other places, the public debate on curtailing religious rights such as Shechita and circumcision and so on.

5 % radicalization on a total community of 790.00 is very much. Far too much to sit back idle for the Jewish community. Without taking action 5 % of the Muslim community, that is almost 40.000 people in our home town

Amsterdam, might turn against civilized society within the years to come.

Together with the rest of the town, indeed together also with that segment of the Muslim communities, which take its responsibility serious, projects have been taken up to face the challenge of the future. Muslims are not leaving Europe, just the same as the presence of the Jewish communities is a fact. In that way we have to face the future as a challenge.

After the Second World War Jewish life in Holland was destroyed. Of the 140.000 members of the Jewish community well over 100.000 were taken away to the death camps of Auschwitz, Sobibor and Mauthausen, not to return. In many, many century old Kehillot Jewish life was extinguished forever.

It was three days after the liberation in 1945. In front of the great synagogue in the city of The Hague three gentlemen, who just returned from their hiding places, met each other. At that moment they had no idea where the members of their family were, if they survived. They did not know at that moment, rather, they could not know, that of the prewar kehilla more than 15.000 members were killed. But they pledged towards each other "We will spare no effort to rebuild our Jewish community to its previous splendor". And indeed all

three of them worked until their old age towards the wellbeing of the Kehilla.

For us, the post war generations people like this were, are and will be a shining example.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude. Only two weeks ago I was walking around once more in the secret annex of Anne Frank. Again not on my own. We were guiding a group of youngsters who could turn a prey to the before mentioned 5 % of radicals. Educationalists of the Anne Frank Foundation observed those youngsters. They listened to their remarks, to their questions.

Two days later we had an excursion with the same group. Now we were walking around Camp Westerbork, the largest durchgangslager, transit camp in Holland from where more than 107.000 Jewish people were deported to the death camps. Again, many questions, many remarks.

At the end of the day, the educationalists of the Anne Frank foundation took us aside. They pointed out a few of the youngsters, to the most outspoken ones.

“That boy, that girl, those children we want to single them out. Those children we would love to train them as peer-guides for the Anne Frank House, in the Transit camps”.

Can you imagine? Young Muslims, now roaming along the streets, within a half year as peer-guides in the Anne Frank House? As role models for their own community?

That's what all our effort is all about.

Let me quote once more the words of Rav Lau. "We achieve this peace not through the highest echelons (ESJELONS) of authority, but rather through personal contact between individuals and with humanitarian gestures. This is the true power of influence...". These words brought me here to Washington, on behalf of the Dutch Government, to share with your government. It was a great honor to share these words with the Jewish community of Silver spring.

Thank you very much.

