

## **Dialogue - a very delicate instrument.**

On a three day conference on European Jewish Muslim dialogue in Brussels, April 2007, I found myself sitting at breakfast with two distinguished religious figures, Rabbi Jonathan Magonet and Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid. Both these figures have been major players in Interfaith dialogue for over thirty years in Britain, setting benchmarks for progress and hope. "I've never had breakfast with an Imam before," I observed quietly to Imam Sajid. "Such a lovely breakfast," beamed back the Imam and immediately I, a Jewish woman, felt at home.

Where does dialogue begin and what is its role in healing a fractured world? "The fight against Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia is a common fight which Jewish and Muslims communities should fight together – shoulder to shoulder", Imam Sajid maintains in his writings and Interfaith work.

Listening is surely the most important part of beginning and as I sipped my coffee, the Imam spoke about how hard it has been for Muslims living in Britain since the 7/7 bombings. In particular he said how difficult it was to achieve agreements amongst Imams, "because they are afraid that if they agree to anything, then they lose control." But quite naturally our breakfast talk turned to our children. "Some of us are even grandfathers," smiled the Imam towards the Rabbi. Dialogue is the process of discovering that the Other is a reflection of ourselves with the same needs and the same deep seated aspirations.

2008 has been declared The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, implementing the EU's motto, "Unity in Diversity." Our Conference was organised by CEJI, a Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, ([www.ceji.org](http://www.ceji.org)). CEJI is based in Brussels and this Conference provided the opportunity to map dialogue taking place in five European countries; the UK, Denmark, Holland, France and Belgium. It also provided a forum for these groups to meet each other to exchange information, ideas, successes and for mutual support. The Conference has produced a Draft Declaration for Jewish Muslim Co-operation, recognising the need to confront hate and prejudice everywhere in the spirit of Human Rights and affirming a commitment to, "direct contact and co-operation between the two communities," as an essential step in creating enduring good relations.

Imam Sajid maintains that the only way forward since 9/11 is "Dialogue with dignity. Let us constantly remind ourselves that anti-Semitism is far from dead in Europe. As a Muslim, I have noted that whenever there is Islamophobia or hatred against Muslims, the signs of anti-Semitism are not far behind".

However, achieving widespread and lasting dialogue is a modern hot potato. Entering into dialogue usually feels and sounds like agreement with the Other. Israelis avoid dialogue with Palestinians in case it sounds as though they agree with wiping out the State of Israel. Palestinians avoid dialogue with Israelis in case it sounds as though they agree with the Occupation.

The question therefore arises, How can you dialogue without agreeing? Godfrey Spencer, specialist in mediation and conflict resolution, demonstrated the answer in a very powerful workshop on mediation. Spencer pointed out that dialogue without

agreement involves the recognition of the same deep-seated needs and aspirations on both sides. It also requires a commitment to listening to our enemies.

Taking the role of mediator, Spencer set up a role play between two Dutch delegates, representing a female Dutch Muslim MP, born in Morocco and Geert Wilders, a Dutch right wing MP, who expresses extreme views about the rising numbers of Muslims living in the Netherlands.

“Why do you hate us?” asked the Muslim MP.

“Is that a need for information?” interpreted Spencer, in his role of mediator.

“Why do you wear headscarves, you look stupid? You need to demonstrate that you are part of the Netherlands,” said Wilders.

“Is that a need for community?” asked the mediator.

Dialogue helps to defuse fear and particularly fear of the future, which becomes a very present fear and threatens to overwhelm us all. The Dutch right wing are afraid of losing their national culture. The Dutch Muslims are afraid they will be faced with genocide if the extreme right wing prevails. The mediator verbalised this as both sides having a deep seated need for safety. Ultimately the workshop effectively demonstrated that both sides had exactly the same needs. In communication there are no losers or winners. Win/Win is the only path to dialogue and healing.

“But we are absolutely stuck,” says Ahlam, a UK delegate, originally from Nablus in the Occupied Territories. “The conflict in the Middle East threatens all our futures. The Israelis and the Palestinians have to find a way to a shared future.” Ahlam campaigns tirelessly towards this future, often criticised by both sides for her outspoken views.

One of the most powerful experiences on this Conference, demonstrating the humanisation of the Other, was provided by Dialogue in the Dark (DID). This is an organisation which creates a totally blacked out room, where participants have to find ways to co-operate if they are going to survive. Completely blind, our group of seven had to find a seat at a table, put together pieces of an unknown object and pour boiling water into cups for tea and coffee.

Co-operating to put together our mysterious pieces, which turned out to be a Russian doll, we learnt both negotiation and flexibility, daring to risk breaking the rules to achieve our goal. DID is a profoundly empowering exercise in trust, co-operation and inter-dependency. As Richard Stone, Founder/President of Alif-Aleph UK ( British Muslims and British Jews) commented, “Dialogue in the Dark opened our eyes.”

DID has travelled to 21 countries, providing the framework for encounter. The behaviours observed from Japan to Mexico have been the same as ours, the opportunity to humanise the Other and create a lasting bond.

DID is not an experience in simulating blindness but a metaphor for stress. It asks, How can we put people, who have never met each other, under sufficient pressure which will strengthen them and encourage them to overcome hurdles together?

It is a process which leads groups towards meaningful dialogue with each other and encourages us to sharpen all our senses towards healing the divisions in our world.

Women are very much an under used resource in promoting harmony and dialogue. Both Jewish and Muslim women were well represented in all the countries and

organisations at the Conference. But the global political picture is very different. Women are present in only 17% of global parliaments. In the UK, women constitute only 19% of the number of MPs in Parliament. The role of women in politics is advancing too slowly. The Conference agreed that Peace is a Feminist issue, but different from the Feminism of our grandmothers. Instead of chaining themselves to railings for the right to vote, modern women need an equal place at the political table.

Some of our inspirations stemmed from the role of ordinary women who promoted peace on the embattled streets of Northern Ireland and the French delegates pointed out that women played a major role in defusing tension in the French suburbs during the recent terrible riots. As Rabbi Michel Serfaty, Founder/President of Amitie Judeo-Musulmane de France said forcefully to the women delegates, “Power is waiting for you.”

It is the Middle East crisis which has triggered the development of Jewish/Muslim dialogue across Europe in the last few years. With the rise in both Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism in Europe, the two communities are seeking common ground and support through dialogue. Although there were major differences in the experiences between the countries represented at the Conference, with multiculturalism in the UK contrasting with the separation of state and religion in France, and specific national incidents such as the publication of the Danish cartoons and the murder of Theo Van Gogh in Holland, the drive to create a harmonious climate for dialogue in Europe is going from strength to strength. As Hugo Gryn stated, “What the world needs is harmonisers, not polarisers,”

Perhaps the most poignant point in the Conference came on the Sunday evening which was Yom Ha Shoah, the Jewish commemoration day for the victims of the Holocaust. All the delegates, Jewish and Muslim, gathered in the dining room, a *yarzheit* (memorial) candle was lit and we held a minute’s silence, in harmony and shared respect.

“Dialogue is a very delicate instrument,” says Rabbi Jonathan Magonet. The encounter, seeing the Other through ourselves, is an end in itself. We have to redefine ourselves in relation to each other, rather than in opposition. There is a revolution going on between the Jewish and Muslim communities and we are witnesses. The responsibility to move into dialogue towards healing and peace and away from disharmony and conflict lies with us. As Martin Buber wrote, “The only way to learn is by encounter.”

Miriam Halahmy M.A.

April 2007

[www.miriamhalahmy.com](http://www.miriamhalahmy.com)