

Rabbis and Imams in Seville

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Just got back from Seville in Spain where I attended a the [Second World Congress of Imams and Rabbis for Peace](#). Strange that it was the first time I had ever been to [Spain](#). It had nothing to do with the ban on returning to the land that expelled the Jews in 1492 (most halachic experts believe it has lapsed). It had nothing to do with hating Franco Fascism. It wasn't even my revulsion at the first national sport of bull fighting. (Tell me, someone, how you justify torturing an animal, send in men with long spikes to inflict injury on it so that it can't fight back properly and then make a sport out of sticking it to death with a sword? The brave little bull of the cartoon world never had a chance! Oh! I forgot, it's like fox hunting, really they enjoy it!) Perhaps it was an unconscious desire to avoid Costa Nostra and drunken Brits turning the color of cheap paella. No, it was for none of those very good reasons. It was purely circumstantial. If anywhere in Europe claimed my cultural, historical, aesthetic or sybaritic loyalty it was Italy. But Seville was a delight with its Alcazar Palace and Cathedral. Must go back for more and Cordova and Granada.

I do indeed visit cathedrals and for that matter, listen to requiems. Most great Cathedrals and Churches are as much museums as places of worship nowadays. However in Anglo Jewry, in particular, the current tidal wave of religious obscurantism has meant that I regularly get asked by innocent children at Jewish day schools or by confused adults who remember the past, why it is that their rabbis have been forbidding them to go and look at, say, the Rubens in Kings College Chapel or the Sistine Chapel in Rome. So it was with delight that, as I was descending the 35 flights of the lovely Muslim Tower that now is the Campanile of the Cathedral, I passed four gentlemen wearing the black hats and frock coats, the uniform of Orthodox Jewish clergymen nowadays, enjoying the climb. There were two dayanim and two area Chief Rabbis from Israel thinking nothing of enjoying the wonders of human creativity, even if associated with another religion. Was this a case of "only in Spain"—or rather of "only not in Britain"?

So why go to Spain now? For the first twenty years of my career I made a point of getting involved in interfaith activities. I was at one stage even a member of that drolly named "The Chief Rabbi's Cabinet" responsible for interfaith activities in Britain. It was, in many respects, very valuable, for I met a lot of impressive spiritual minds from other religions, which was both inspiring and chastening. It made me appreciate that God has many ways of communicating with human beings, and it saddened me that too many of my own seemed to be in a much lower league when it came to understanding the nature of spirituality. It was clear that we had more in common intellectually than we did with the fanatics of our own respective religions.

But I gave it all up because after a while I came to feel that there was little seeping down to grassroots. I remember the then Cardinal Koenig of Vienna complaining that for all his efforts to root out anti-Semitism he was

having almost no impact on his rural priests. I also became frustrated with conferences and speeches and grandstanding when I wanted to see action, not words. I guess it became a matter of selecting other priorities. So I left the field to younger, and manifestly better, replacements, for a great deal has been accomplished over the years, particularly with regard to the Catholic Church. (But, of course, the situation in the Middle East has muddied the waters in more ways than one. Once we tended to think the Anglicans were closest to us in Britain; now the pendulum has swung the other way.)

Now I was interested to see if anything had changed since I was last involved. Seville was an impressive gathering, the second attempted; a gaggle of Sephardi rabbis from France of North African origin (they speak the language and understand the culture, after all), an Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, and an array of assorted rabbis (Chiefs and Grands and Highs) and dayanim from all over the globe (not to mention experts, spokesmen, time-servers and those along for the ride, as well as a mass of reporters and TV camera people who just swarmed around the most exotic dressers on view).

There was a similar, if not quite as high-powered, range of Muslim imams. Shia and Sunni, American, Far Eastern, Middle Eastern and Western Imams who offered as wide a range as you'd expect of attitudes, backgrounds and education as the rabbis did. The general tenor was one of shared concern for spirituality and inter-human behavior and for the challenges we all faced of materialism, egoism and fanaticism.

Tension only erupted every time the Gaza clerics exploded in anger over what they perceived was Israel's exclusive fault at the parlous state of Palestinian children. The Far Eastern Muslims seemed somewhat bemused at this one-sided approach and uncomfortable that Islam was being presented through an Arab Middle Eastern filter. We had some discussion about religion and politics that, of course, was not resolved. Nothing was. Nothing could be. Politicians or clerics or both are always too busy blaming everyone else. King Solomon has it right three thousand years ago. It's all "hot air" and nothing fundamentally changes under the sun.

There were still traces of the fear that the "other" was out to convert. An Israeli Head of a Yeshiva declared that he was only interested in discussing the issue of whether a boy who becomes Bar Mitzvah during the Omer has to recite the full blessing when he starts his obligatory count! One imam wanted us to condemn the controversial cartoons of Mohammed, and he got some rabbinical support too. But that was given short shrift, I'm glad to say. After all, we were neither the American nor the British government.

It was as valuable as most conferences are in bringing people together and making contacts. I do not underestimate (or overestimate) the value of this. When I expressed my reservations about results to a wonderful elderly Rabbi Pappenheim of Jerusalem, he replied, "I do not want to enter the Afterlife feeling I didn't try my best to heal the world!"

I was most impressed by the number of young and enthusiastic Jews ready to get involved and I'm delighted there is talent coming up through the ranks.

But as for me, I've served my time. Did it do any good? Lord knows. But we dare not stop trying.

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