

# Prejudice

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

## Prejudice Part 1

Baroness Warsi, cochairman of the Tory Party, says prejudice against Muslims in the UK has become socially acceptable. She also warned against dividing Muslims into moderates and extremists, saying such labels fuel misunderstanding (BBC January 21).

Perhaps now Muslims might just consider what Jews feel like. If ever there was a case of pots calling kettles black, this is it. The major source throughout the world of virulent anti-Semitism now is Islam. I am not talking about anti-Zionism or being anti-Israel, I talk specifically of hate, libel, and incitement against Jews in general. If Baroness Warsi wants to say one should not differentiate between extreme Jihadi lunatics and ordinary Muslims, then I assume she will agree that all Muslims should feel responsible for anti-Semitic hate speech. But you know and I know this is not on the cards.

I have difficulty with the very term Islamophobia. Is it a phobia against Islam, the religion, or against individuals who practice it, or people who come from Muslim countries? And is "phobia" the right pathology? Yes there are hate filled sub-humans. The sort of fascist thugs who paint swastikas on synagogues and tombstones and I have no doubt they will try to target Muslims, Jews, any convenient minority. But I do not believe that such sentiments are dominant anywhere I know of. On the contrary it seems to me that most free societies bend over backwards to accommodate Muslim sensitivities even to the point of allowing demonstrations aimed at turning their cultural clocks back to the Middle Ages and overruling their own values of freedom of speech and sexual liberation. When opposition develops against a Muslim mosque, whether in the East End of London or in New York, the overwhelming majority of politicians, religious leaders, and journalists come out in favor. And this is not out of fear but out of a genuine attempt to accommodate differences, even if I think it often goes too far.

What does exist is anxiety. Let's call it Islam anxiety. The homegrown, western educated, financially comfortable Muslims who do plot to kill and maim innocent civilians in the name of their religion are something most peace loving people fear. Is it surprising then that ordinary people wonder if a Muslim they see might be one of them? Yet, if anything the media, clerics and politicians have bent over backwards not to scaremonger.

The obvious reaction ought to be for moderate Muslims to distance and distinguish themselves in exactly the same way mainstream Israeli society and leadership rejected the Stern Gang and other violent cliques in the past or the Kahana-like "settler" extremists of today. But if Baroness Warsi does not want us to differentiate between moderate and extreme Muslims, then she is confirming the polls that suggest most Muslims around the world do indeed

identify and support the extremists.

## Prejudice 2

Sadly, prejudice is universal and must be combated wherever it is. We Jews do not have a good record ourselves. The Western European and American Jews of the recent past intensely disliked the Ostjuden and often campaigned against them emigrating from Eastern Europe. The main opposition to observant Jews wanting to erect eruvim comes from other Jews. Lithuanians do not like Chasidim, and Satmarer Chasidim do not seem to like anyone apart from themselves (even that is not true anymore, as they have split into rival camps). But still the sorest source of prejudice is that directed, mainly in Israel, against Jews from Oriental lands, sometimes called Sephardim or Mizrahim.

It does not make sense of course. Moses at Sinai made no distinctions based on the degree of religiosity or where different Israelites came from. And most of the greatest minds and inspirational Jews over the past two thousand years have come from the Orient.

Significant blame lies with Zionism. The founders of Zionism, the early pioneers, and the Mapai political leadership when the state was founded were overwhelmingly Eastern European, socialist, and secular. They became the new nomenclatura which has and still does dominate much of Israeli life. They looked down on what they saw as the primitive, traditional, and poor Oriental Jews who flooded in after being expelled or driven from Arab lands. Even if there always was a Sephardi wealthy elite as well. The result was a sense of victimization and alienation that only began to change when Menachem Begin (also East European, but one sympathetic to tradition and heritage) came to power. Then came the emergence of an Oriental and religious political party, Shas, fed up with being patronized by the Vuzz Vuzz (slang for Yiddish speaking Ashkenazim).

I despise the arrogance of the secular left and of the Ashkenazi elite. The rabbinate of the Oriental world was always more tolerant and welcoming of its less observant. It had to, because communities were defined geographically rather than by degree of religiosity. The rabbi was the rabbi of the whole community. On the other hand, since the rise of German Reform in the nineteenth century, Occidental Orthodoxy was notoriously strict because it could shunt its less observant off to them. In contrast, Oriental Judaism tended to be more superstitious and credulous and kabbalist rabbis held the masses in their thrall. Over time this has changed. Black garbed Oriental rabbis have come to imitate the Ashkenazi rabbinic elite in dress and attitude. The Ashkenazi world has become even more credulous and superstitious than the Oriental. Even Ashkenazi rabbis often try using Kabbalah both to squeeze money and scare the naïve.

Amongst the Sephardim, rivalry and tensions have grown too, between the strict and the lenient, between different communities, and between those who reject the name Sephardi and prefer the term Mizrahi and vice versa. The terms "Ashkenazi" and "Sephardi" are now used very differently than the way they originated. Ashkenaz started as term for Rhineland Jews and Sephardi for

those who came from Spain. Over time they came to differentiate those who lived under Christian rule from those under Islam and what kind of liturgical style and religious authority one followed. Just as "Mizrahi" once meant the European religious Zionist movement and now it means something very different.

Thank goodness the younger generation nowadays tends not to care too much about these ancient rivalries and on the ground one hardly comes across a Jewish family in which Ashkenazi and Sephardi/Mizrahi do not intermarry and mix as seamlessly as Jews whose grandparents originated in Poland or the Ukraine. (It does seem ridiculous that some Ashkenazi yahoos forget that if Moses or King David came back to earth they would be more at home with Oriental Jews.)

One cannot stop prejudice, yahoos will be yahoos, Muslim or Jewish. But one can challenge oneself to ensure one does not suffer from diseases of body or mind. Besides, we Jews are few enough to afford the luxury of subdividing ourselves into extinction.