

Report - February 2008

Following the second historic Hindu-Jewish summit between the Chief Rabbinate and the Hindu Dharma Acharya Saba (the Hindu leadership umbrella organization) which was co-sponsored by AJC; we then hosted Hazrat Maulana Jameel Ilyassi, the President of the All India Council of Mosques and Imams (involving more than half a million Imams serving the some one hundred and eighty million Muslims – more than all the Muslims in the whole Arab world!)

The three day Hindu-Jewish meeting was remarkable in many ways. To begin with the Hindu delegation of some twenty people included major Acharyas/Swamis who have millions of monks under them and even more million of devotees in India and around the world. In addition they were accompanied by leading Hindu scholars from India and the Hindu Diaspora. Moreover the delegation of the Chief Rabbinate which engaged in dialogue for a full day with the Hindu personalities was also remarkable as it included both Chief Rabbis of Israel and the members of the Chief Rabbinate's Commission for Interreligious Dialog – most of whom are chief rabbis of Israeli cities. It is fair to day that such an encounter would have been unthinkable until very recently and the AJC has played a crucial role in facilitating this process. As a result interfaith encounter has become an increasingly acceptable engagement for the Israeli Jewish Orthodox establishment in the last few years, strongly encouraged by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs which appreciates the significant potential in this area for strengthening diplomatic relations.

The dialogue was clearly stimulating and even revelatory for the participants as they discovered how much both sides shared in terms of values and teachings; and also were disabused of many stereotypes and misunderstandings. In particular, the rabbis were impressed by the Hindu insistence that at the heart of their faith is the belief in one Transcendent Power, the Creator and Guide of the Universe. This and many other fascinating points were reflected in the important joint declaration issued.

A second day was devoted to the visitors' encounter with Jewish history and contemporary life. In addition to visits to Yad vaShem and the Old City, the Hindu leaders met with President Peres, Prime Minister Olmert, Minister Herzog, Deputy Minister Whbee, and were hosted at the Knesset.

The AJC hosted an evening at Bet Moses which was also attended by Israelis of Indian origin at which India's unique history of hospitality and tolerance that the Jewish communities enjoyed in that country over the generations was feted.

The focus of the third day was the religious diversity and interfaith cooperation in Israel and as this is most dramatically evident in the north of the country, the program took place in Haifa and environs. The Druze religious leadership

turned out in full force in Daliat El Carmel and in addition to presenting their community history and relations with Israel and the Jewish people, the Druze community provide a festive lunch for the Indian visitors, rabbis from the Chief Rabbinate's delegation and from the vicinity, together with Muslim, Christian and Bahai leaders; accommodating the various dietary requirements. The Bahai World Center and the Ahmedi community were also visited and the conclusion of the whole visit to Israel culminated in multi-faith event at the Haifa City Hall hosted by the Mayor Yonah Yahav and the Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, who is also the chairman of the Chief Rabbinate's Commission for Interreligious Dialogue.

Both Israel's political and religious leadership were greatly impressed by the delegation and its passionately positive attitude towards the Jewish People and the Jewish State which was greatly intensified by this successful visit and summit, with the potential for enormous positive influence throughout the Hindu world.

The visit of Hazrat Maulana Jameel Ilyassi followed on from the historic delegation of the All India Council of Mosques and Imams through AJC's Project Interchange, that took place last summer. At that time the opposition to the mission was so fierce in certain Muslim quarters in India that Maulana Ilyassi stayed behind to debate and refute his detractors, while the delegation was led by his son. Maulana Ilyassi declared the purpose of the visit of the delegation at the time, to promote reconciliation and cooperation between the Muslim and Jewish communities and announced his desire to be a bridge between the Arab and Israeli worlds as well. Whether or not anything is achieved in that regard, the change in attitude that these visits has already achieved among the scores of millions of Indian Muslims is already more than significant. Maulana Ilyassi requested that the AJC host him personally in order to promote these goals and his visit of three days included meetings with President Peres and the Chief Rabbis as well as senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, visits to Yad vaShem and the Old City and Shabbat eve dinner at the Rosen residence. In addition Ilyassi visited Al Aksa Mosque and held meetings with the Mufti, the PA Minister of Religious Affairs and other leading Palestinian religious and political figures. The extensive Israeli media coverage included an appearance on Israel's prime time news chat show, London and Kirschenbaum, during which the interviewer expressed amazement at Ilyassi's enlightened and courageous stand and congratulated the AJC on this initiative with the Maulana and his organization.