

SAJBD CONFERENCE

Rosen: Religion can be used for good or bad

DAVID SAKS
PHOTOGRAPH: ILAN
OSSENDRYVER

SO IS religion, as the title of Rabbi David Rosen's keynote address at Saturday evening's SAJBD Gauteng Conference would have it, the "problem or the solution?" The short answer to that, he said, was "Yes".

As he went on to explain, it all depended on how the underlying moral principles underpinning the world's major religions were applied, or not as the case might be. Religion could be a great force for good, but it could also be abused by extremist elements in order to justify acts of violence and destruction.

The consistent message that the different faith community leaders needed to get through to their adherents was, in the words of the late Pope Paul II, that "violence in the name of religion is not religion". Unless violence was employed in legitimate acts of self-defence, it was a desecration of religion itself.

Rabbi Rosen did not believe that many of the criticisms currently being levelled at religion by secularists were necessarily valid, but one that needed to be taken seriously was the charge that it was the root cause of much, if not most, of the violence in the world.

On one level, the claim was without foundation. As he pointed out, the worst mass killers in the 20th century, such as Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot, had been profoundly anti-religious. Moreover, many current international conflicts that were generally believed to be religious ones, such as in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and even the Middle East, in reality had other underlying causes, such as dis-



Rabbi David Rosen

putes over land or tribal rivalries.

Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly true that religion, through the exploitation and manipulation of religious differences, often played an important role in exacerbating the situation. This was unfortunately true of the Israeli-Arab conflict, what had essentially been a nationalist struggle between two peoples over territory was being trans-

formed into a religious one.

The first was resolvable because it allowed for the possibility of practical compromises, but the second, by the absolutist nature of its claims, could not brook any compromise at all.

Conflict was unfortunately what generally made the headlines. In reality, as Rabbi Rosen pointed out, there was a great deal of positive developments on the ground in the sphere of inter-

faith relations that needed to become more widely known. It was further common to associate religious fundamentalism with violence, but that, too, was misleading. Without ignoring the violence and persecution perpetrated over the ages in the name of "absolutist and exclusionist theological claims", it was also true, as shown by the example of the Amish and many among Haredi Jewry, that such funda-

mentalism need pose no threat to anyone else.

Rabbi Rosen's underlying message was that ultimately people of different faiths needed to learn to respect the other's differences, even if they did not agree with them, and focus on relating to one another through the many more things that they had in common. Through this, religion could indeed become the solution to the ills of the world.

Much in interfaith dialogue rests on shared values

STAFF REPORTER
PHOTOGRAPH: ILAN
OSSENDRYVER

IT WAS a disappointment at the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, Gauteng Council Conference when three guests, invited to speak on interfaith, did not show up. The speakers from the Muslim, Hindu and Christian communities, who had been invited, were absent.

So was Minister Collins Chabane from the President's Office who could not attend because of the loss of a family member.

However, the discussion about interfaith between the Jewish and other communities went ahead.

Interfaith dialogue throughout the world was growing exponentially, said Rabbi David Rosen, director of Inter-religious Affairs of the American Jewish Centre.

In interfaith relations, he said, people needed, not only to be understood, but also to understand others. "It is about values, dignity of human beings working together," he said.

Rosen is an ambassador for Judaism in the world. He spends 50 per cent of his time travelling the world to promote interfaith relations.

"Interest in this issue is growing and I have never seen so much contact, interest and positive attitudes towards this. Even people with negative perceptions are changing, even in Muslim communities. Interfaith relations

have been an amazing success story," he said.

Although the Chief Rabbinate in Israel was supporting interfaith movements, not all the rabbis were comfortable with the degree in bringing together old values and the modern world.

"There is a tendency to be insular. There is passionate debate, but some are still opposed to interfaith relations," he said.

Rosen paid tribute to the late Pope John II who established diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel and had been deeply involved with interfaith negotiations.

"A triumph was a meeting held in 2002 when the Vatican met with the Chief Rabbinate in Israel and great breakthroughs were made," he said.

The Pope wanted a direct contact for dialogue and Rosen was appointed for the job. Formal delegations were set up and there have been meetings annually in Rome and Jerusalem where certain interfaith declarations were produced.

"These declarations showed how much normality and shared values exists between the two parties despite differences," he said.

Such was the success that the Chief Rabbinate started talks with the Anglicans, bringing religious leaders together. The Chief Rabbinate had also had negotiations with Muslim and Hindu leaders.

Gwynne Robbins, deputy direc-



Gwynne Robbins

tor of the Cape Council, related her story about the success of the interfaith initiative in Cape Town.

The story started when a rabbi, an imam and a priest were arrested during the apartheid years and locked up in the back of a van.

They started talking and decided to continue their dialogue. They approached the SAJBD Cape Council and asked them for a venue.

"So began the Open Heart Open Minds society which has been running for over 30 years," she said.

The key to success was to have a few rules. One was to find a common cause and build on it. It did not have to be apartheid, but could be xenophobia, HIV/Aids or anything else, she said.

The group meets once a quarter to discuss issues such as death, drug addiction, ethics in the press and environment.

"There is plenty we can share," she pointed out.

Another rule was to focus on issues that united, not divided. Topics such as the politics, abortions or the Middle East were avoided.

In 1999 the Parliament of World Religions decided to hold its second international conference in Cape Town. Thousands of people attended.

Another rule, said Robbins, was to find suitable projects, in which faith communities could work together.

"One such (project) is our annual prayers for the city; this has grown from prayers in public gardens to a popular event each January, which is attended by the mayor in the Waterfront amphitheatre in which youth from different faith communities, through song and dance, bless the city for a peaceful and trouble-free year."

The community should be exposed to the existence of religious diversity in an attitude of acceptance and equality, said Robbins.

The group now had two tours to different houses of worship with lunch at a vegetarian faith community.

"These visits break down barriers, dispel ignorance and create an atmosphere of interfaith

understanding," she said.

With provincial funding, the group ran annual workshops for religious leaders. It had developed a handbook to deal "sensitively" with women abuse.

Other events included peace meetings, an industrial conference, Cape Town's 150th anniversary, memorial services, the opening of a canal and the blessing of the new Cape Town soccer stadium.

While acknowledging the great amount of work done, Robbins said interfaith would always remain a fringe movement.

"To minority communities like the Jews, the Baha'is, the Brahma Kumaris, local Shiites, interfaith is important because we need to encourage acceptance, tolerance, and religious diversity," she said.

Some gave approval, without financial assistance, others would have nothing to do with it "because they have the security of knowing that they, alone, have the ticket to heaven and they do not want to encourage their members to acknowledge that there are people equally moral, equally ethical and equally worthy, who are quite comfortable with different beliefs", she said.

"I believe we are a success story. We have played a role in making the city aware of its religious diversity. We have reduced intolerance and promoted the acceptance of religious diversity and that can only be good for our community," she said.

SAJBD CONFERENCE

SAJBD looks back on a productive two years

STAFF REPORTER

THE LAST two years had again been busy and productive ones for the Gauteng Council; the wide array of successful public events that had taken place under the Board's auspices, included debates, lectures, workshops, Holocaust educational and commemorative gatherings and book launches.

Delivering his annual Chairman's Report, Doron Joffe Gauteng Council chairman of the Board, said:

"We are very proud to have been involved from the outset in the planning and subsequent establishment of the Johannesburg Holocaust and Genocide Centre, which has already become an important resource for educator training in Gauteng, the North West and Mpumalanga," he said.

The annual Yom Hashoah ceremonies again had excellent speakers and attracted large attendances. Dr Natan Durst, a world authority on post-Shoah psychological trauma counselling was the guest speaker, who also addressed other Jewish gatherings and was also extensively interviewed in the general media.

"We believe very strongly that South African Jewry should fully

identify and be involved with the institutions of democracy in our country. To this end, last year we hosted representatives from six political parties for a pre-election debate, and during the election itself put together a 'Jewish Election Observer Team' to assist election officials," said Joffe.

"The Board was instrumental in ensuring that they obtained maximum exposure to the key leaders and opinion-makers in this country, both within and outside of the Jewish community, and through this were able to strengthen our own excellent relations with government and civil society," he said.

A "core plank" of the Board's mission was to be the interface between Gauteng Jewry and government. To that end, it facilitated important meetings between senior political leaders and various sectors of the community.

"On our initiative, Jewish business leaders met with (then) Finance Minister Trevor Manuel, Jewish doctors with Gauteng's MEC for Health, and influential Jewish women from the business sector, professions and academia with (then) Gauteng Premier Paul Mashatile.

"At our last conference, I reported back on the important work that

was done under the Board's auspices to alleviate the plight of xenophobia victims. Sadly, during the last two weeks we have once again had to call on our community to assist in a broader national crisis.

"Public hospitals have been especially hard hit by the workers' strike, resulting in severe hardship and indeed often in danger to life," he said.

The Board once again took on the role of co-ordinating the Jewish community's relief effort, and again, he said, it could be proud of the way both organisations and individuals had rallied to the cause.

What these activities consistently showed was that the SAJBD focused very much on helping the Jewish community be an involved, constructive and identifying part of the wider South African society.

"Johannesburg Jewry has an honourable record of public service and of contributing to this city's development, and we want very much to ensure that this continues," he said.

While anti-Semitism levels in South Africa had risen steadily over the past five years, they were still significantly lower than those of other Diaspora communities. It was through maintaining a zero-tolerance approach to any form of



Doron Joffe and Paul Mashatile (PHOTOGRAPH BY ILAN OSSENDRYVER)

anti-Semitic behaviour that the Board could help to keep this scourge under control.

Another very important aspect of the Board's work, was upholding Jewish religious rights. When university examinations, or school tests were set on Yomtov, as happened regularly, it went to every reasonable length to resolve the problem with the institution concerned.

"While we will not deviate from our stance that Jewish rights in this area cannot be compromised, we also do everything we can from our side to be of practical assistance".

The SA Jewish Board of Deputies is the umbrella organisation mandated by its affiliate organisations to speak and act on behalf of all Jews in South Africa. As such, it seeks to be as broadly inclusive as possible, said Joffe.

"The Board strives to be a forum within which all sectors of our diverse community feel they have a voice and can have meaningful input into the decisions made on their behalf. What ultimately unites us all, is our common desire to further Jewish communal life and uphold Jewish civil rights wherever they may be threatened.

State of interfaith in Gauteng is not healthy

STAFF REPORTER

THE STATE of interfaith in Gauteng today left much to be desired, Alana Baranov, diplomatic liaison for the SAJBD said at the Board's Conference last weekend.

"A lack of permanent and effective faith-based sector structures at all government levels, metro, local and provincial; the problems surrounding the equal and consistent participation of all the religious communities in the various interfaith events; and the need to

build open and engaging channels of communication, as well as bridges of understanding between faith groups, are the main challenges faced by those involved in interfaith in Gauteng," she said.

Historically, the Jewish community had played a central role in interfaith dialogue and education in and around Johannesburg.

From well-loved figures such as the late Dr Franz Auerbach to the late Professor Jocelyn Hellig, there had always been members of the community who had reached out a

hand of friendship and co-operation to people of other religious traditions from a place of true understanding and respect.

She said in particular, the years when Dr Auerbach had been active in interfaith activity, had seen the SAJBD become immersed in various local initiatives, which had created a sense of collaboration, and camaraderie as religious groups had taken a leading role in the post-apartheid transition of our society.

"And, even today, our community is very much in the forefront of current interfaith engagements. Running the Board's interfaith portfolio, I have been involved in a plethora of activities over the past two years, from ritual cleansing ceremonies at government buildings to atone for human rights violations of the past, to local government task teams dealing with critical issues such as HIV/Aids awareness, combating crime and violence in society through the 'Take Charge' campaign, examining ways to end human trafficking and even leading a faith-based sector election observer team which monitored elections," she said.

Despite those truly worthwhile projects, it was her impression that

the majority of interfaith interactions did not go very far beyond a "tea and sympathy" format.

"They are very polite, but largely superficial meetings where people from different religions traditions learn the basics about each other's beliefs, but rather focus on co-operating on external issues which are not immediately concerned with theology or dogma," she said.

While getting people from various walks of life to assist government with social challenges, was indeed vital, she said.

A lasting and consequential relationship between religious traditions could not take place until there was meaningful understanding about each other's beliefs.

"Only through being true friends, finding places of common agreement and outlook and respecting and celebrating areas of divergent views, can we work together in real action to effect positive change," she said.

Another challenge she sees in interfaith circles, in this province in particular is the lack of young people and, particularly women, in the interfaith structures and programmes.

"Young people, as the leaders of tomorrow, and women as the backbone of society, are essential in any discussions and relationships between the faiths. If we want interfaith in this province to go from strength to strength, we need to ensure that we work on creating an inclusive passion within our own communities about our own faiths, allowing our religions to be represented by the moderate majority, and then to extend this outward in our interactions with other religions," she said.

Nelson Mandela, the father of the new South Africa, once said: "The strength of inter-religious solidarity in action against apartheid, rather than mere harmony or co-existence, has been crucial in bringing that evil system to an end."

"Sixteen years on from our country's democratic transition, the struggle to end social and economic inequality and oppression is continuing. Now more than ever, we need people from across religious, racial and cultural divides to come together in recognition of the beauty of each other's identities and our shared national home, and work side by side as true brothers and sisters to fulfil the potential not only of our province Gauteng, but of South Africa," said Baranov.



Alana Baranov, Wendy Kahn and Rabbi David Rosen. (PHOTOGRAPH BY ILAN OSSENDRYVER)

Diversity of views on Israel is in order

STAFF REPORTER

JEWES SHOULD not be expected to have the same political views on Israel, Avrom Kregel, national director of the SA Zionist Federation, told the SAJBD Conference.

The Kaplan Centre conducted a survey on the attitude of South African Jews to Israel every five years, he said, the last one being in 2005.

It was found that 83 per cent supported Israel, while in the US, it was half, or less. It was also found that 78 per cent of South African Jews had friends or relatives in Israel.

"Therefore, there are strong bonds

with Israel," he said.

The survey showed that 53 per cent said they had a strong bond with Israel and 33 per cent had a moderate bond.

"That equals, in total 86 per cent. Only one per cent of them were anti-Israel," he pointed out.

Diversity in the community was its strength, he stressed.

There were four youth movements with different political views, all of which were accepted.

"It has been difficult to keep them together, but we have done it," he said.

Being anti-Zionist, unfortunately, gave people stature today, said Kregel. "These people get lots of media publicity," he said.

Never one Jewish voice - but we're all one family

STAFF REPORTER

"SHOULD THERE be one voice on religion?" This was asked rhetorically by Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein at the SAJBD Conference. He answered it lightheartedly: "Which planet are we living on if we think this can happen? Since when has there been one Jewish voice?"

It was difficult to be a chief rabbi when there were so many other chief rabbis around, he added tongue-in-cheek.

"Each person is created in the image of G-d. We have clashing sovereignties, egos, and personalities. There is no easy solution. One voice for the Jewish community does not exist," he said, adding that South Africa is blessed to have the Jewish community it had.

"We are the envy of the world and this has emerged from conversations I have had with many visitors," he said.

The community was vibrant, lively, and opinionated and hosted a large number of functions every year.

"There are many voices and energy which hold together," he said.

The fact that there was one Beth Din, one kashrut department, was positive in uniting the community.

"All people are welcome irrespective of their level of observance, which is never questioned. Eighty five per cent of Jewish children attend Jewish schools," he said.

"Despite our differences, we are one family which stands together with the family we have inherited," he said.

