

Parliament of the World's Religions: Jewish Wisdom at the Parliament

Occupied as I was with learning from those of other faiths, I spent relatively little time at the Parliament studying from Jewish teachers. In part, this was due to factors beyond my control: many of the rabbis and teachers whom I really wanted to hear had given their presentations and left by the time I arrived on the fourth day of the conference. I did have an opportunity to spend ninety minutes with Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, who facilitated a workshop for Jewish attendees at the Parliament. I learned little from him as a rabbi, but much from him as a facilitator. I was gobsmacked by his abilities to nudge, provoke, and even coerce comments from participants, and yet still remain warm and personable. The conference organisers had hoped to elicit comments from this session that would help them make Jewish participants feel more welcome, but I did not hear anyone complain about a lack of Jewish content or Jewish comfort. As far as I'm concerned, even the well-publicised absence of a Jewish prayer at the closing plenary did not alter the fact that Judaism was very well represented at the Parliament. Out of sixty major speakers publicised on the Parliament's website, six were rabbis. Not a bad percentage for a religious group that claims .2% of the world's population.

Sensitive Jews might well have been in for a bad time. At a number of sessions I attended, Israel and its conduct towards the Palestinians was angrily critiqued as a matter of fact, and mostly as a passing comment unrelated to the topic at hand. Many speakers seemed to assume that Israel was acting as an evil power, and that this truth was so obviously self-evident that it didn't even need to be discussed or argued. I give a lot of credit to Jeremy Jones of the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council. In an article he wrote for the Australia Israel Review, he cited a number of uncomfortable moments he experienced at the Parliament, including times when speakers were openly confronted on what

they were saying. Ultimately, he came to a positive conclusion about the week: “It is easy to dismiss the entire concept of the parliament as misdirected or irrelevant, but the presence of many inspired and inspirational people, the opportunity for hearing and learning and the possibilities of demystifying religious traditions and breaking down stereotypes and hostilities, all contribute to the conclusion that the parliament is both worthwhile and significant.”

Although I did not actively seek out specifically Jewish content, one of those great moments of truth was granted to me by a rabbi I know quite well: John Levi. It was the last day of the Parliament, and I was attending a session with the ostentatious name, “The Future of Religion in Australia? Melbourne’s religious leaders in dialogue with young people.” Three religious leaders, one Jewish, one Anglican, and one Moslem, answered questions put to them by three young people of the same faiths. This was an interesting, if not particularly challenging session—nice for the end of an exhausting few days. At one point, the religious leaders were asked to discuss the trend of interfaith marriage, and how their communities approached it. I learned that interfaith marriage is permitted within the Moslem community, who are only concerned that their children not marry atheists. Of course, the hope is that the parents will choose to raise children in the Moslem faith.

Rabbi Levi stated that interfaith marriage is a serious issue for the Jewish community. This was not news to me. The prevalence of interfaith marriages is not the dominating topic that it was twenty years go, but it still looms very large in the psyche of many of us who strive to help people to find lasting meaning in a Jewish way of life. It was what Rabbi Levi said next that touched me so deeply. I’m going to make an effort to approximate his words: “We Jews are essentially agnostic on what happens to us after we die. We believe in the immortality of the soul, but we do not speak with confidence about what happens to us in the next life. Instead, we believe that we obtain immortality by passing Judaism on to our children.”

This was a stunning moment for me: one that allowed me finally to understand and also articulate why interfaith marriage is such an issue for parents, and why the couple's decision not to raise their children as Jews is such a source of pain. In my last congregation, one of the most reliable attendees at Shabbat morning services was a retired butcher from an Orthodox background. He had moved across town a number of years ago, but still continued to support his old synagogue as well as his new one. He cherished his Jewish friends, loved to take a role in the Torah service, and looked forward to our modest kiddushes following services. He and his wife had raised four sons. All four had married non-Jewish women, and all four sons were now raising their children as Christians. My congregant would speak with enormous affection about his sons, but a shadow crossed his face when he mentioned—as he always did—that his grandchildren were not being raised as Jews. There were so many future moments he would not mark: he would never celebrate a Shabbat dinner in his children's homes. He would not pass the Torah down to his grandchildren at their b'nei mitzvah. He would not stand under the chuppah as his grandchildren were married. Instead, he was seeing his Jewish heritage cut off. Such a loss.

I see now why it is such a powerful moment when we pass the Torah down from one generation to the next. We know that the legacy will live on, at least for another generation. We have a precious gift to give, but this can only happen if someone is standing at the other end, ready to receive. As a rabbi serving a congregation with a large number of mixed marriages, I see it as my sacred duty to help shape a Jewish identity within all of our families, to assure that Judaism lives on within the hearts and minds of our children. I now understand much better why it is so important to me, and why it is so very important to the community as a whole. It is because our children, and their children after them, represent the best possibility we have to live on forever.