

**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES
UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS**

MINUTES

November 7, 2016

JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, NEW YORK

Attendance:

Rabbis David Straus, Alvin Berkun, Noam Marans, David Sandmel, Harold Berman, Jonathan Waxman, Steve Gutow, Adam Gregerman, Jeffrey Wohlberg, Lewis Eron, Wayne Franklin, Joel Meyers, Daniel Polish

Guests:

Ambassador Ira Forman, Kenneth Jacobson, Deputy Consul General of Israel Amir Sagie, Consulate of Israel Political Advisor Andrew Gross

Cardinal Timothy Dolan opened the meeting with prayer.

New members of the group were introduced.

Ambassador Ira Forman, U. S. State Department Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, spoke of concerns and issues regarding anti-Semitism in the world today. He opened by saying that some have compared the problem of anti-Semitism to that of an earlier generation, but that is comparison does not appear to be accurate. Much progress has been made in many places, although serious concerns and dangers remain.

Anti-Semitism in Western Europe is not the same as it is in Eastern Europe. Larger numbers, by far, in Eastern Europe consider leaving their homes because of anti-Semitism, although even in places where anti-Semitism is a major concern, there is very little violence that results from it.

In France, although the vast majority of Jews are not likely to leave, there are threats that cause the community much concern and there is a sense that the government has not been as responsive as it should be. Approximately one third of the Jewish students attend private schools where they feel safer and more comfortable. The major concern in the Jewish community is the question of the future of French society. Education toward the values of democracy is extremely important and the Catholic Church has been very supportive to the Jewish community.

Local government and especially the police are critical in responding to individual incidents. And it is critical that citizens speak out and reject the bigotry that is expressed by some. The Pope has been an important and powerful voice against bigotry, and Catholics also face problems in many places. We will not end anti-Semitism, but our voices can be important in toning it down and monitoring its effects as well as we can.

Kenneth Jacobson, Deputy National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, echoed the sentiment that the strength of civil society is critical. He noted that in the U. S. there has been much concern during the 2016 election campaign that not enough voices were heard when prejudice and bigotry were expressed.

Mr. Jacobson noted that there seems to have been a loss of the shame that used to be connected with being labeled an anti-Semite. After World War II there was a realization of where anti-Semitism could lead, but the passage of time and fading memories have eroded that.

He also noted that the economic and the refugee crises in Europe have heightened tensions. Also he noted that there has been a blurring of the boundaries between anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel.

There are also new areas of concern in America as well, including the Internet and social media, which have made it much easier for people to spread negativity and prejudice and have made these things much harder to control and monitor. There are troubling expressions of anti-Semitism from minority communities, e.g. the Black Lives Matter movement, which has raised important issues, but which has also repeated the false accusation that Israel is committing genocide. Expressions in the Muslim community are also sometimes extreme in accusations toward not only Israel but also Jews in general.

The good news is that people do respond and that the U. S. government is committed to taking a positive role.

Father Dennis McManus discussed the troubling fact that many people identify religion as the problem and fail to recognize that religion can also play a valuable role in creating solutions.

He also emphasized the importance of realizing that anti-Semitism isn't only a Jewish issue. Delegitimization of any group is everyone's problem, because where Jews are in trouble others will be in trouble soon.

Many feel that religious freedom is being inhibited, particularly as regards the right to practice religion in the public square.

There is much work still to be done on Nostra Aetate, as we find ourselves fifty years later with many church leaders unaware of what it was all about. Much is accomplished when the church expresses its voice in these areas, but the work must be sustained the lessons repeated.

Cardinal Dolan expressed pride as an American that there is an office to monitor and combat anti-Semitism. He asked if there is a similar office dealing with persecution of Christians around the world. The answer was that there is not a specific office with this mandate, but there are many State Department groups working in this area, including the office of Rabbi David Saperstein, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. Ambassador Forman noted the irony that the State Department was in the past accused of devoting itself to keeping minorities out of the United States, including specifically Jews, but now is far more open to minorities and its consulates and embassies are much more supportive of local religious groups.

Mr. Jacobson noted that the first lesson of World War II was that Jews cannot afford to be powerless. But the corollary is that when Jews have power there will be criticism and some of criticism is legitimate. We always have to be careful about how we use power, but we also need allies who will speak up when criticism goes beyond what is appropriate. For example, when people deny the connection between Jews and the land of Israel, then “anti-Israelism” becomes anti-Semitism.

Ambassador Forman suggested that a working definition of anti-Semitism is needed. It must include denial of Israel’s right to exist, use of double standards in evaluating actions taken by Israel and demonization of Israel (e.g. comparing Israelis to Nazis.) But care must be taken not to overuse references to anti-Semitism.

Responding to questions about Eastern Europe, Ambassador Forman noted that there is reason to be concerned about right-wing governments, but that in some settings enforcement of the law by a stable government has an important role to play. The church also has an important role to play in combatting anti-Semitism. It is important that people work together.

In response to questions about anti-Semitism in the Muslim community, Ambassador Forman noted that most Muslims in most places want to live in peace in their communities. But he noted the irony that for a long time anti-Semitism was generally an export from Europe. Now it is largely an import from the Middle East. Copies of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion are commonly sold in many places and in many languages. Allies from other communities are more powerful voices than our own. We need Muslim allies.

Kenneth Jacobson noted that there are too few Christian voices speaking out about persecution of Christians in many places.

Cardinal Dolan asked if there were concerns about the possibility of a pope being elected from Africa or from another place where there are few Jews and there would have been little experience in dealing with Jews. Ambassador Forman and Mr. Jacobson both noted that there is a great deal of institutional experience that will always be available and that existing relationships will mean a great deal.

Fr. McManus noted that as many people have learned anti-Semitism through cultural and family traditions, it will be very important for Jews and Catholics, and Protestants as well, to work on joint seminary programs and experiences that build positive relationships and give textual sources that combat prejudice of all kinds.

Responding to a question about the Black Lives Matter movement and its negative statements about Israel, Mr. Jacobson noted that the best response comes from within the African American community itself, when people stand up and say this is not what we represent. He suggested that it is also important for Jews to support the things on which we agree while not hesitating to say clearly where we disagree.

The date was set for the fall meeting of 2017 as Thursday, November 9, in New York. Topics for the June meeting were also discussed, with the possibility of inviting a newly designated Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem as guest speaker. Other topics suggested included demographics of our communities and issues of intermarriage, as well as issues that may emerge from the 2016 elections, such as hate speech, ideological and political divisions in American society and the need for civility in all discussions. New York Times columnist David Brooks was suggested as a possible speaker for the future. It was also suggested that there is a need to consider the impact of the current political climate on the Muslim community around us and a need to learn more about Islam in general.

There was discussion of the recent declaration by UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) concerning Jerusalem, which ignored references to Jewish and Christian history. Several possibilities for resolutions that could be shared with our organizations and with the public were proposed.

Deputy Consul General of Israel Amir Sagie expressed thanks for efforts that have been made by all those at the table. He noted that the Director General of UNESCO had personally cautioned that because the resolution was not consensual it would actually be impossible to implement. Ambassador Sagie noted that there have been other cynical attempts to deny the connections of Jews and Christians to holy sites, but he also noted that because of work that had been done, some of the language of the proposed resolution was changed, and some votes of nations that had previously not been helpful were changed to oppose or abstain from the resolution.

Rabbi Alvin Berkun noted that Jewish organizations have been in contact with Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Argentina who has been in touch with the Pope and reported that a response of some kind was in process. Others shared the concern that delegitimization of Jewish connections to holy places inevitably leads of delegitimizing Christian connections as well. Rabbi Noam Marans expressed appreciation for the fact that it was the Catholic participants in the dialogue who had placed this issue on the table.

Bishop Gregory Mansour spoke of the threats of genocide in the Middle East and emphasized the need for strong voices and a wide coalition to fight against genocide, citing the example of ISIS threatening the Yazidi population in Iraq. He noted the importance of people speaking out in a way that does not appear to be in opposition to any religion or religious community, but rather expresses theological, moral and spiritual concerns about violence and murder.

Rabbi Steve Gutow and Rabbi David Sandmel both suggested that we should seek coalitions that include Christians, Muslims and Jews speaking together whenever possible and speaking about many communities that are under the threat of atrocities and genocide.

Ambassador Sagie also spoke of concerns about Catholic church property and freedom of religion in Israel. He assured that the government of Israel has no tolerance for harassment of the clergy of any faith or attacks on churches or mosques.

Rabbi Wayne Franklin expressed the concern of many in the Jewish community over the treatment of non-Orthodox Jews at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Cardinal Dolan noted that in many places there are more Jewish voices than Christian voices expressing concern about persecution of Christians. Bishop Mansour suggested that it was important for people to speak out about concerns for other communities and that the Muslim community needs to express such concerns publicly as well.

Our next meeting will take place on June 21, 2017, at St. Patrick's Cathedral.