**SPEECH TO INTERFAITH CONFERENCE**
**31 March 2003**
**Parramatta, Sydney Australia**
**By David Bitel**

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Thank you for the invitation to speak today. I'd like to acknowledge the indigenous owners of the place at which we meet.

It is a sad time and I think the fact that we have a war taking place at the moment, a war which very few of us I am sure in this room would have supported without United Nations sanction, I think highlights the failure of society and governments to adopt the very principles that the two speakers before me have been espousing and the principles which as you will hear when I talk also reflect the principles of Judaism. We can all only hope and pray that as a consequence of inter faith meetings like this here and similar discussions taking place around the world, that we will be able to move forward and that peace will ensue – Shalom as we say in Hebrew, Salaam as the Arabs and Muslims say. It is so tragic that politics takes over and blinds us to the ways in which we should properly respond and that we often forget the fundamental principles of the religious and ethical teachings to which we have all been brought up to adhere.

I commence by noting that I don't profess to be a deep Jewish scholar. I don't come with the academic background of the two more eminent religious speakers who preceded me. I am what is colloquially called a "secular Jew". I was going to commence by telling you a story from Jewish tradition. But then hearing Father Patrick speak about the obligation or the fact that we move freely, and given my passion for refugee matters, as President of the Refugee Council of Australia, I decided to tell you a second Jewish story.

As the Emperor Hadrian was being carried through the streets of Rome, a Jew passed by. "Long life to you, oh Emperor," the Jew greeted him. "Who are you?" asked the Emperor. "I'm a Jew". "How dare you, a Jew, greet me like that," Hadrian raged. "Chop off his head", he ordered his soldiers. Another Jew who chanced to pass by then saw what had happened to the first Jew and decided not to greet the Emperor. "Who are you?" Hadrian demanded. "I

am a Jew". "How dare you, a Jew, pass by me without greeting me", raged Hadrian. "Chop off his head", he ordered his soldiers. The Emperor's counsellors were filled with astonishment. "Oh Emperor, we cannot grasp the meaning of your action", they said. "You had the first Jew decapitated because he greeted you. Why did you do the same to the second Jew because he did not greet you?" "Are you trying to teach me how to handle my enemies?" retorted the Emperor.

That first story I feel is a rather poignant story for Jews, and is very relevant given the historical level of anti-Semitism Jews face.

The second story is entitled "The relativity of distance". Three weary Jewish refugees stood before the Paris representative of the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (a Jewish NGO for refugees). "Where are you all going?" he asked them. "I'm on my way to Rome," said the first. "London is my destination," said the second. "My plan is to go to South Africa," said the third. "South Africa? Why so far?" the agent asked wonderingly. "Far? Far from where?" wistfully countered the refugee.

Our topic really is immense, and when I came to think about what should I talk about, I thought, do I talk about it with a religious dissertation on Jewish theology. It is important to talk about a few fundamental Jewish principles which confirm the commonality of the various religious teachings of the three religions represented today.

A second approach might be to give a history lesson and to speak about the pluses and the minuses of harmony throughout history arising from the great religious teachings. From a Jewish perspective, there are a lot more minuses than there are pluses.

Indeed I think it needs to be said over and again for any contemporary Jew, the Holocaust (or Shoah) is so dominant in our minds that it is very hard for any Jew not to forget it. I am fortunate that my parents came from England and so survived the Second World War, but my grandparents were victims of the Tsarist pogroms where many members of my grandparents' families were wiped out during those anti-Jewish riots in Russia. I find it extraordinary nevertheless that I in my childhood and still today, suffer nightmares associated with Shoah. I'm sure many Jews do likewise. I think it is impossible to remove our history of persecution from the psyche of somebody who is Jewish. But we have to learn from history. We

recognize that history is cyclic, but we have to progress from the divisions and horrors of the past to progress to something more fundamental, and that is a society where there is social harmony and which is founded on the just teachings of our 3 great religions.

As a lawyer, I thought I could take a legalistic or sociological/anthropological approach, but then I decided that that would also not really do justice to the topic. I asked a distinguished Judge friend of mine what he considered about the term 'social harmony' when looking at the Abrahamic faith? And he replied, "Social harmony from Abraham? Look, he fathered two of the great combatants in what's going on today, so where is the harmony?" But then I also look at the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and what Abraham did when he argued and pleaded with God for God to save the city if he could find 10 righteous men. And he was unsuccessful!

Judaism is a way of life; it is more than just faith. That is a teaching in the Jewish law "the halakha" *(See the Useful Summary of Halakha: the Jewish Way in Rabbi H Donin – To be a Jew. Chapter 2 (quote page 29).)* And when we look at the fundamental ethical principles (the religious duties or "Mitzvah") of Judaism, I have grouped them into different elements, and I think from looking at these, one can see the bases on which social harmony can grow. *See Donin, Chapter 4 and examples there of acts of kindness which are obligatory.*

There is the primary obligation for kindness – "hesed" or compassion. As noted by Denin, "The love of God cannot be separated from the love of man" (p.46). The Talmundie Rabbis considered compassion to be one of the three distinguishing marks of Jews. It is among the highest of virtues. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of the people from the north country who "lay hold on bow and spear, they are cruel and have no compassion" (Jeremiah 6:23). *See discussion on this term in Rabbi Louis Jacobs – at pages 89-90.* Flowing from this is the obligation to extend compassion to men and animals; and thus we have the great teaching that "whoever saves a single life it is as if he saved an entire world". *See Discussion in Jewish Literacy: Jewish Ethics and Basic Beliefs – para 274.*

"Love your neighbour as yourself" *Lev 19:18* is the major principle of the Torah, as it is in a different version in Christianity, and I am sure it is equally in Islam. In explaining how that precept should be considered, the great Jewish rabbi Hillel several thousand years ago said that the essence of Judaism is: "What is hateful to you, do not do unto your fellow." *For*

*discussion on Hillel see Chapter 1 of Step by Step in the Jewish Religion, Rabbi and Telushkin: Jewish Literacy, para 68.*

In my mind, a corollary principle of Judaism is the obligation which is repeated so consistently throughout the Torah, to treat fairly strangers. It is said in many different ways, both directly and indirectly, to love strangers, to have regard for strangers, not to oppress strangers, for remember that "you were strangers in the land of Egypt". *See for example – Exodus 22:20, Leviticus 19:34, Deut 10:19, Deut 24:17, 27:19, Jeremiah 22:3* Applying that fundamental principle within that context is I think the essence of a lifestyle that we should all adhere to.

To me, perhaps because of my passion for refugees, I think my favourite Biblical story always has been the story of Ruth. Here was a woman (and it's significant that we have women who play significant roles in the Bible) we have Ruth, who was not a Jewess, whose husband died and who then went with her mother-in-law Naomi and said, "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" and "Wherever you go, I will go" *Ruth 1: 16-17* and that fact that even though we are not renowned as a proselytizing religion, the fact that we could bring into so importantly into our religion and our history, a person who was an outsider, a stranger, I think is one of the most – to me personally – one of the most significant aspects of Judaism. *It is also a powerful response to those who argue that Jews are isolationist and chauvinistic. How can this be so, if the greatest King, David, and indeed the Messiah are descended from her?*

There are in terms of Jewish ethics, two further essential principles in Judaism relevant for this discussion: that of Justice *See discussion on Justice in Step by Step in The Jewish Religion by – Ch 2.* The author stresses the three demands of Justice in Judaism:

(1) The duty to respect the life of others.
(2) The duty to respect the property of others, and
(3) The duty to respect the feeling of others

and Righteousness (in Hebrew, "tzedakah"). *See Discussion in Step by Step in the Jewish Religion, Ch 3.*

Righteousness is a more difficult step to master than Justice. All that Justice demands of us, as we have seen, is that we do no harm to others. Righteousness comes to us with a further

demand. It asks us also to do good to others. Justice teaches that we may not do unto others what is hateful to us; Righteousness teaches that we should do unto others what we would like to have done to ourselves.

There are so many Biblical quotes which stress the obligation of justice – "Justice, justice, you shall pursue" *Deut. 16:20,* "Let justice well up like water and righteousness as a mighty stream" *Amos 5:24,* "To do justice and to love goodness and to walk modestly with your God." *Micah 6:8,* "Act with kindness, justice and equity in the world, for in these I delight" are just some of the quotes referring to the obligation which appear throughout the Old Testament. Any society which is not based on Justice is one which will fall apart.

It is a remarkable fact how many Jews are lawyers, but I suspect that in large part it is because we were brought up to adhere to the precepts of Justice. We find abhorrent the situation that law is based on wealth and power, but not based on Justice, because Justice cannot be bought. You don't have to go beyond King Solomon to find anybody more just in the Old Testament. Social harmony requires Justice as an essential precondition for stability.

And Jewish law required Justice not only to Jews but also to strangers and neighbours. The one standard applies to all – "Not to oppress the stranger, the orphan and the widow" *(Deut. 24:17, 27:19, Exodus 22:21, Jeremiah 22:3)* And to return to our topic, Abraham when pleading on behalf of Sodom challenges God to practice Justice: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly".

The other concept is Righteousness. In Hebrew, we refer to *"tikun olam"*, the obligation to do the right thing. The obligation is on Jews to be merciful, modest and charitable. Compassion and hospitality – these are fundamental precepts within the concept of Righteousness. The learned Jewish philosopher Maimonides wrote extensively on the laws of charity, offering 8 degrees of charity. *See the discussion on Charity in Jacobs pages 71-74 and the examples given in "To Be a Jew" Rabbi Donin – pages 48 to 52.*

We are a very small people, but most Jews whether they are devout and religiously Jewish, or secular Jews, I think have an obligation to attempt to practise the fundamental principles of Judaism. Jewish teaching states that we should be "A light unto the Nations" *Isaiah 49:6.* If we are a Chosen People, this can only be to pursue the Mission of teaching an ethical lifestyle

according to the principles I have been discussing. Of course, others are equally moral exemplars. The Rabbis of the Talmund had a high regard for righteous Non Jews, just the same as every modern Jew reveres the "Righteous Gentiles", both named and unnamed who risked life and all in the Shoah.

I have mentioned the Shoah and I have mentioned the persecution that Jews have suffered in the past. However, in the present, we still face this insanity. *Genesis 18:25 Exodus 21:24*

This brings us to the difficult quote from the Torah "an eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:24). Many have used this passage to refer to the vengefulness of the Judaic ethic. However, there is good reason for arguing that the principle espoused is in fact consistent with the need to do justice – it fits well with the modern legal doctrine of proportionality. In other words, don't demand more in punishment than the damage caused. There are other interpretations of this controversial passage which similarly place it in its historical context – *see for example discussion in Essential Judaism at pages 242-243, Talushbin, at para 257 and see also the passage:* "Fathers shall not be put to death for the sins of sons, nor sons for the sins of fathers" *(Deut 24:16).*

With sadness I quote from a press release which was put out by the President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Jeremy Jones, this week. It mirrors what appeared on the front page of the Jewish News of 26 March 2003, in an article entitled "Anti-Semitic Incidents in Sydney". I will read from this press release:

"On behalf of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the elected representative organization of the Australian Jewish community, I write to convey the concerns of the Australian Jewish community at the way in which Jewish Australians have been subjected to public vilification and harassment during the course of the debate on the merits of the war in Iraq .. In the past few weeks in particular, the slur that American foreign policy is controlled by some form of Jewish conspiracy has been broadcast or written on numerous occasions. We have seen how Australia's racist and extremist groups have seized on the airing of this anti-Jewish myth in the mainstream media to justify their hatred of Jews and their attempts to take away from the quality of life of Jewish Australians. In the last week alone, some of the more significant incidents of anti-Semitic activity in Sydney and Melbourne include a graffiti which was daubed around Condell Park saying "Kill the Jews" on the 21st of March. On the

21st of March a synagogue in Sydney's Southwest was the subject of an arson attack. On the 22nd of March the Jewish Museum in Melbourne was vandalized with glass doors and panels smashed. On the 24th of March, anti-Jewish graffiti was spray painted at the entrance to Sydney University. The Jewish community calls on all Australians in positions of moral and political leadership to publicly condemn all manifestations of anti-Semitism as well as any other racial hatred which emerges during this time. For any of you who saw the placards which have been displayed in some of the recent anti-war marches in which many Jews have been prominent organizers and activists, you will find the same level of anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish signs which would have made Goebbels feel proud."

We are living in very troubled times, we are living in times where it is very easy for people to look at the other and to lay blame and forget those very fundamental principles which all the religions teach. As a Jew, I would only encourage discussions like those which have taken place today and plead with all persons of goodwill from all faiths to live by these common standards.

Thank you.