
Correspondence

Muslim-Jewish Dialogue

To the Editors:

I am writing in response to the Muslim Student Association/Kedma collaborative event held on November 1 at Steinhardt Hall. The event was a great start to what can potentially be a strong relationship between Kedma and the MSA. About 30 students attended a discussion moderated by Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations Professor Heather Sharkey. Professor Sharkey began the lunch discussion with a short lecture on the history of Jewish life under Muslim rule during the Middle Ages. Many students, including myself, were surprised to learn about the camaraderie and mutual respect for each other's religions at the time. Jewish life was unhindered, and in fact protected, under Islamic rule. This was an excellent starting point for the discussion.

While the discussion began in that historical context, it quickly evolved into a modern socio-political dialogue about the compatibility of traditional religious values and westernized society. This turned out

to be a common ground for many attendees; both Jews and Muslims identified with their inner struggle to live simultaneously as both Americans and religious adherents.

As a whole, the event was seamless and civil. While many points were agreed upon by Muslims and Jews at the event, when such consensus was not achieved, there was respect for the opposite opinion. That may be the best part about having such events in a college environment: the open-mindedness of everyone involved, in combination with general intellectual curiosity, facilitates productive conversation—dialogue from which people learn important things about others as well as themselves.

I look forward to working with Kedma in the future, towards creating an environment on campus where Muslims and Jews respect each other and seek to learn more about a not-so-different culture, and towards, somewhat ambitiously, changing the way people perceive the Muslim-Jewish relationship.

Samir Malik

President

Muslim Students' Association

University of Pennsylvania

From the Israeli Consulate

To the Editors:

Yasher Koach (good job) on a highly informative and interesting journal. I was particularly attracted to the article by Jacob Boyars, "The Druze and the Jews," (Issue #2) which shed light on an important community in Israel. Most people may not be aware that Druze serve in the Israeli Defence Forces and are loyal citizens of Israel.

Keep up the good work.

B'Shalom,

Lou Balcher

*Director of Academic Affairs
Consulate General of Israel in
Philadelphia*

Return of the Rebbe

To the Editors:

I am writing in response to "Return of the Rebbe," Raphael Cohn's interview with me and Immanuel Schochet, appearing in issue two of *Kedma*. Several of Rabbi Schochet's comments raise questions about the ethics of my critique of Lubavitch messianism. He accuses me of citing anonymous rabbis who criticized Lubavitch and then "hiding and saying, 'Oh, I didn't say it; I'm merely quoting it.'"

This is a serious misrepresentation of the passage in question. Significant sections of my book, *The Rebbe, The Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference*, for reasons explained in the introduction, are written in the form of a memoir detailing my own education over the past years regarding both the Lubavitch movement and its critics. In the passage to which Rabbi Schochet refers, I describe my first personal exposure to the stunning level of hostility to Chabad in certain circles. Here is the relevant paragraph in its entirety:

At the same time, a distinguished rabbi in the Traditionalist Orthodox community contacted me to express his longstanding hostility toward Lubavitch. This was my first direct, personal experience of the scathing, sweeping, almost breathtaking denunciation of the movement in some quarters. The Rebbe, I was told, had regularly visited his father-in-law's grave so that it should already be established as a shrine when he himself would be buried nearby. He had his followers construct and display giant menorahs of an atypical sort, insisting on the view that the spokes of the original menorah

were straight rather than curved, “because every new religion needs a symbol.” I did not quite know how to react and eventually came to realize that for all his sympathy to my argument, this rabbi saw nothing significantly new in the latest developments. To him, Chabad had long been a species of religion clearly outside the boundaries of Judaism (p. 62).

This is a report of assertions that I regarded as remarkable examples of “breath-taking” hostility. No reasonable reader could assume that I was affirming these views myself.

Rabbi Schochet also maintains that my assertion that I was not anti-Chabad before the evidence of posthumous messianism emerged is “a blatant attempt to disguise a personal agenda.” This characterization flies in the face of irrefutable evidence. Near the beginning of the book, I reproduce the final passage of a review of Howard Sachar’s *Farewell Espana* that I wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* (Nov. 27, 1994) shortly after the Rebbe’s passing. I will simply quote it here and leave readers to draw their own conclusions:

Sachar’s seeming ignorance of traditional Judaism is compounded by his hostility to contemporary

Orthodox Jews. He tells of entering a synagogue in Spain and finding an overweight young man stacking chairs; his shirttail was hanging out and he had food residue on his mouth. Conversation revealed that he was an American Lubavitcher hasid who had left his home nine years earlier to dedicate himself to the rekindling of Jewish observance in Spain. The hasid told the author that he avoided mingling with Gentiles and spoke Yiddish to his family.

Here is Sachar’s comment: “One foot rooted in garlic and chicken soup, the other in sanctimonious ignorance,” this hasid “is an intriguing variant of Jewish revival in Spain. I wonder what Maimonides, ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi, or others of the Golden Age’s austere humanists would have made of this gelatinous mess.”

I don’t know. But I think I do know what they would have made of a man setting out to write their history armed with minimal knowledge of Jewish tradition and capable of such cruel outbursts directed at its most devoted adherents.

Thank you and best regards,
David Berger