

CD-1023 Transcription

American Jewish Committee seminar-meeting [5]. 10 March 1980.

M:

If you could find seats, please.

(break in audio)

-- welcome you all back this afternoon, and in particular extend a welcome to the representatives of the Egyptian embassy who are with us in addition to ambassador.

I think you all know that the American Jewish Committee has long engaged in a dialogue with Western Christian groups. It's part of our goal of building bridges between different groups, inter-group and inter-religious relationships. But in the last several years we've seen a resurgence of Islam, both politically and religiously, and we ourselves have started a dialogue with various Muslim and Islamic groups. This commission itself, last April, when it met in Chicago, devoted the entire session to the question. Last May in New York, we further discussed Jewish-Muslim relations. But this today is a unique opportunity for us to hear [01:00] a real expert on the subject, and we're very

fortunate to have as our principal speaker the ambassador of Egypt.

He comes from a distinguished family. His father was a member of the Egyptian Supreme Court; his uncle was a famous historian. He graduated from Cairo University with honors, he's received additional degrees from Harvard. His long diplomatic career includes serving with the United Nations in New York and in Geneva; it includes serving, in addition, on behalf of his country in Paris, in London, in Ottawa, and in Cairo. In 1968, he became the head of Egyptian interests in the United States, and in 1973, he became ambassador of Egypt to the United States. He was very active in resolving the [Hanafi?]-Muslim crisis in 1977. He was very active in the Camp David meetings and the peace process. He's married. Carrying on his tradition, [02:00] his daughter is a graduate of Georgetown University; his son is a graduate of Catholic University. They continue his tradition of scholarship and learning.

His topic today will be the present state of Islamic/Jewish relations. My friends, I have the honor to present to you his Excellency the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the United States, Dr. Ashraf A. Ghorbal. Your Excellency.

**Ashraf Ghorbal:**

Thank you very much for your kind words. It's a pleasure to be with you here this afternoon. The American Jewish Committee is first in many things, as I see it: not only really having a [03:00] -- a discussion and a dialogue about Islamic/Jewish relations, but also in the fact that, believe it or not, you were the first to cross the Sinai after the peace treaty. When some of your people came to see me -- Richard [Morse?] was planning a visit to my country -- he asked at the end, after we talked about whom to see and what to do, and he said, "How about going from Egypt to Israel?" And I said, "It's coming. I don't know if you will just be there at the right time, but why don't you keep your plane tickets through Athens or through Cyprus or... And when you go there, try your luck." Well, I learned a few days later [04:00] that he did work it out. And when another American Jewish group was going to Egypt and they asked me, "How do we fix our going through Sinai?" I said, "Go and ask the American Jewish Committee." (laughter) They have done it.

Let me say that... that really, Middle East, our world... being the birthplace of the three religions -- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam -- has been [audio cuts to being very very quiet for ~20 seconds; much is inaudible) [endowed?] by the (inaudible),

which is from there, the revelation has descended on Moses (inaudible). On all his followers of the [05:00]. And we have been honored by that. We have been left (inaudible). And we have a feeling that when things get difficult, we should revert to a meditation with our Creator, and reflect heavily, and come out, I'm sure, unanimously, that united we must be, because he taught us, whatever our denomination is, the same things. [06:00] -- from the Ten Commandments down to the teachings of Islam. The tolerance, brotherhood, the love, the peace, and the co-living. I was reading the other day a beautiful speech that Rabbi Tanenbaum himself wrote some eight years ago. [Yes, 16?], February 19, '72. And let me quote him.

He says, "There is an even more amazing affinity between the fully developed systems of the two religions -- Islam and Judaism. A, both possess a tradition of revealed law -- [07:00] [*halasha?*], [*halacha?*] in Judaism, and [*cheriya?*] in Islam -- which regulate worship, ethics, and social etiquette in all aspects of life. B, both have an oral tradition in Judaism: Torah, [*Shi biyen?*] -- yeah, [*Shi Biyel Pape?*], and in Islam the Hadith, which authoritatively interpret and supplement the written law. And C, both rely on a completely free and unorganized republic of scholars rather than on a hierarchy of religious dignitaries who make decisions. And D, the study even

of purely legal matters is regarded in both religions as worship. The holy men of Islam [08:00] and Judaism are not priests or monks, but students of the divine (inaudible) law.

"In addition, both Judaism and Islam," continued Rabbi Tanenbaum, "shared such common social traditions and moral attitudes as the following: they were both primitive democracies characterized by the absence of privileged (inaudible) and classes; the absence of forced obedience to a strong authority; a high respect of freedom of speech, for human life, dignity, and freedom." End of quote.

I don't think I can spell it out more beautifully and more to the point. And indeed, if one translates that into modern reality, one should see that there is there, and there should be, [09:00] an affinity and a companionship of objective, and, I am sure, no need for diversions of procedures.

We all look to the same thing, but maybe from different angles. But the most important is that we see that definite thing in its beauty and in its eternity. Yes, in that democratic process of divergence of use, we could differ, but that doesn't mean that we need to quarrel. Differ is the essence of democracy; quarrel is the beginning of anarchy. And I say that in the past period,

where nationalism has had a tremendous impact on people, [10:00] made use of what I would call the extreme [look?] of religion to serve nationalism and to serve political ends, tended to bring two people -- or, I should say, even three people; Christians, Jews, and Muslims -- in a quarrel unnecessary, because, again, the Middle East was the birthplace of religion, was the cradle of those religions in civilization, and which must be governed by the laws of that civilization: love, peace, brotherhood, and humanity.

Some people look today and read the papers and say Islam is un... in a fervor. [11:00] There is a resurgence in Islam but there is also extremism in Islam. I think they try to do that when they look at Iran. But I say they are wrong. What is happening in Iran is not an Islamic revolution. It's a political revolution. It's the deposing of the head of a state, the Shah, replacing him by another political system. It just happened that at the head of that political system, a religious man. An ayatollah. It is not against Christianity. It is not against Judaism. And by consequence, you cannot call it by a religious name.

Definitely [12:00] one does not agree with what the Iranian militants are doing in holding hostages, diplomats that have the

sanctity and have the right to be not only free to move around, to return to their homes, but to conduct the business for which they were sent. But that is one thing. And a religious revolution is another thing. Look at Afghanistan. There is a Muslim country where the Soviet Union has gone in and occupied the country against the will of its inhabitants. And the ones who are fighting this encroacher, this aggressor, are Muslims. [13:00] But the point I am trying to say is that sometimes, inadvertently, we try to give names to certain events, and we make the mistake by giving them religious names when they are essentially political ones. In certain instances they have been motivated definitely by a religious teaching, by a religious interpretation.

You -- Mr. Chairman referred to my taking part in the releasing of the hostages in Washington. Abdul [Haliz?] -- Abdul Haliz, the head of the Hanafi Muslims, though that he was acting on the directives of Islam. His interpretation of Islam was that he had the right to captivate these people [14:00] and to seek an amendment to his ills and grievances against society. And we, the four or the three Muslim ambassadors came back to him and told him, "But Islam taught you to be rational, to be tolerant, not to hurt people who have not hurt you: have these people hurt you in any way or in any manner?" And it was through the proper

interpretation, the proper dialogue, that he realized finally that he was on the mistaken road, and by consequence let go of the people whom they were holding.

But one thing which I think one must bear in mind: [15:00] in the past few years also in the Middle East, we have had a fervor of nationalism that, again, made use and is still making use of religion. I have referred to the case of Iran and Afghanistan. Let me refer to Israel.

When some Israeli leaders talk about the need to establish, for instance, settlements on the base of biblical right, that is where I say there is a mixing between religion and nationalism. If one is going to use the biblical right of one religion, what about the other people who have other religions and they have equally a (inaudible) or [16:00] or a Christian right according to their book, the New Testament? Are we going to go into the settling of political differences on religious basis? If we do, then we are complicating political solutions instead of solving them.

And I say that the time has come where in our political matters, we need to look at things from the sense of [*emodius vivanti?*], a compromise in between the two sides. That was the basis of the



solution between Egypt and Israel, the basis of an understanding of Israel has a security and we must attend to it. [17:00] And Egypt has a right to regain its territory, and we must attend to it. And the two must co-live together in harmony, and let us attend to it. And I say the same thing in Israel: Israel has definitely a right to security and to have a feeling of security from its neighbors. And they are not only Muslims; they are Muslims and Christians and possibly Jews too, because we would have a Jewish community, small as it was, in Egypt during the previous period, growing as it should be and as I pray it will be. And I'm sure it will be. So will it be again in Syria, in Jordan, and in the West Bank which hopefully will then be a Palestinian state. And then have that co-living not based on a quarrel [18:00] between religion, but a co-living based on an understanding between religions. Helping the political masterminds in both countries to see the commonality of solution in between and not the clash of religion that accentuates the political differences that they may have at one moment or another.

I know I treaded on sometimes some ticklish political and, shall we say, philosophical and other points. But this is what I say is needed, is to talk about these things openly, frankly, with a rational approach, with no inhibitions. If we don't, as I say,

we go back to the time when we used to sit at the United Nations, Arabs among themselves, and say how righteous we are, and Israelis among themselves [19:00] would say how righteous they are. And head-on collision once every five years, and spilling each other's blood, and God knows who is the winner, who is the loser -- but in final analysis, we all are losers.

So to sum it all up, I believe that relations between Islam and Judaism today is a relationship not of collision, but of the country. It is a relationship of association, of mutual understanding, of the need to cede to the other the point that the other is anxious to portray. Because there is a common objective among all of us: [20:00] not that one is right and the other is wrong, but because we have all one thing that we need badly -- a peace for ourselves and our children, and to do so we have to understand each other before anything else. I thank you, and I will be taking your questions. (applause)

**M:**

Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. I think we've asked also Ambassador Ephraim Evron of Israel to join us. Let me tell you a little bit about his background. From 1965 to '68 he was a minister in the embassy of Israel in the United States. Thereafter he was ambassador to Sweden, then ambassador to Canada. After that he

was involved with the Hebrew University for a number of years and is now the -- newly appointed as ambassador of Israel to the United States. [21:00] It's my pleasure to introduce to you Ambassador Ephraim Evron of the state of Israel to the United States of America. (applause)

**Ephraim Evron:**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I see from the agenda that I am supposed to respond to my friend Ashraf.

**Ashraf Ghorbal:**

You need to agree with me. (laughter)

**Ephraim Evron:**

I apologize for not having been here and not knowing what to respond to. The job of the ambassador of Israel is complicated in normal times; it's a little more complicated these days, and I need a few more hours every day and I find myself running around like a propeller. And somehow there's always a [quarter?] for now which I cannot catch up with, and this was the [quarter?] for now in which Ambassador Ghorbal spoke to you. [22:00] So quite frankly, I'm at a bit of a loss as to what to respond to. Usually I agree with him, if he agrees with me beforehand. (laughter) And I suppose what we'll have to do now

is take questions and answers. But there's one point that I just wanted to correct an impression.

When -- and I keep finding that this business of mutual education is a continuous exercise in which we are involved. I remember very well the first visit, the first visit of President Sadat to Israel. I was then the director general of the Foreign Ministry and was, together with my colleague, Ben [il-issa?] who is now the ambassador in Cairo, [23:00] in charge of the preparations. And the thing that struck me most when the visit was over was that after talking for the first time face-to-face to our Egyptian colleagues, how little we knew of each other -- of each other's problems, and how much we learned in those couple of days that we spent together about each other's complexes, inhibitions, fears, hopes, etc. And I mention it because this matter of mutual education is going on even now between me and Ashraf. And there's one thing that I wanted to correct today and educate him about, and that's the business of the settlements. As if we come to [24:00] live in Jordan, Samaria, because of some biblical commandment. This is not the case.

It's -- I don't have to tell this group -- about the historical connection between people and country. Jordan and Samaria are

the birthplace of our nationhood. Any effort to try to raise it will be unnatural, artificial, and not successful. I don't know whether I can call myself, and probably I shouldn't, as the ambassador of Israel; I'm not very orthodox in the sense that I go to synagogue three times a day and I pray, and I know that by now I have made my position here a little precarious; [25:00] there will be people who will want to send somebody who does that. Or Moshe Dayan, even -- I know he's even less -- he has less religious feelings than I have. And yet if you read this book, *Living with the Bible* -- an extremely revealing book on the personal side, much more than his autobiography. It does reveal this sense of longing for a country, which is not based on a biblical commandment. I hope that Moshe Dayan would not be cross at me if I say that there's no biblical commandment that he would feel obliged to comply with. He's not the type. And yet, it is intrinsic; his deep [26:00] feeling for the land is there.

So if we feel that we have a right to live in Hebron or in Bethlehem or (inaudible), it's not just because it is ordained so in the Bible. I think we feel (inaudible) that because we are Israelis and we are Jews, it's immoral to bar us from living there, provided it's done in the proper manner without dislodging, without uprooting anybody.

I also think that since, whether we like it or not, it has been ordained that we and our neighbors there have to [27:00] live together for centuries to come, we have to learn to coexist. And by separating us from each other -- that's no way of doing it. So I'm talking now about the principle. The question of application is something different: how you do it, when and what measures and so on. That's something for the political, the elected leaders of any country to decide.

But I do feel that maybe Ashraf has learned something today. It's not just the biblical commandment that makes us feel that way. When I travel in what they call the West Bank -- which is just a misnomer because Tel Aviv and Haifa are also part of the West Bank, and so is Beersheba, and then all the old [28:00] maps and -- not the old maps, on the new maps -- these geographical areas are called Judea and Samaria, but I wouldn't belabor the point and I'll accept without arguing further the misnomer of West Bank -- I don't feel a stranger there when I travel there. I don't want to feel a stranger when I travel. And we feel that our neighbors across what used to be the green line should understand it also. Otherwise, the tail end that I heard of Ashraf Ghobal talking about how we all yearn for peace and how we all should strive for it -- I endorse every word of it.

And I can assure you that we will do everything possible [29:00]  
to make this come true. Thank you. (applause)

M: I think at this point, each of the ambassadors has indicated a willingness to accept questions. The only thing I would ask is that this is an interreligious affairs commission; it is not a political commission, and I'm sure the questions will be as reasoned and as intelligent as their presentations have been. And having said that, who would like to ask a question of either one or both of the ambassadors? Yes?

Q: I -- (inaudible) said -- it was recently my privilege to attend a major seminar on Islam, on the occasion of the 14<sup>th</sup> century of Islamic (inaudible) held at the American University. And while this concern about politics might have been observed by the Islamic scholars from (inaudible), inevitably [30:00] the (inaudible) was there, a lovely, distinguished gentleman from (inaudible) university was there. And when each of those gentlemen spoke, including the (inaudible) ambassador -- and this was on Islam solely, not on relationships with the rest of the world -- as though interjected for -- automatically or mechanically in the middle, not being able to (inaudible) what was being said, were two political statements. One was

about Afghanistan, and the other was about Jerusalem and Palestine. I don't mean to take issue, but I am wondering whether it is possible in this day and age, when discussing these very deeply [held?] matters, not really to (inaudible) from within the context but the Islamic/Jewish dialogue, rather than to try to test them. Not to take issue with your summaries, [31:00] but I listened for -- to at least five distinguished gentlemen of faith, who are religious leaders; they all do make a point of integrating the same two political points into their addresses at this conference, which was designed solely for the observance -- the beginning of the observance of the fourteenth century of Islam.

M: Gentlemen, would either of you care to comment or respond or add?

EVRON: Since I wasn't there, I can't make any comment.

M: Mr. Ghorbal?

GHORBAL: Let me just say a few words here. Surely you cannot by any means draw a line and say "this is purely a religious affairs and this is political affairs" -- when we talk about Jerusalem, for instance. That's where the two really get to overlap and overlap [32:00] very much.

And for freedom of access to all religious places, to all



faiths, I think we are all unanimous. Any action to the contrary in the past was wrong and should not be repeated. To divide a holy city that encompass all these religions is wrong. But at the same time, to ignore the political rights of some in the process is equally wrong. What is it that we are trying to achieve? As I said, a political solution, a commonality of interest, [33:00] and a commonality of living. And these three ingredients call upon us to try to find the solution. And in Jerusalem -- and I beg your indulgence: when I say we have suggested -- don't divide the city; keep it as is. But at the same time, have a municipal council for East Jerusalem and have a municipal council for West Jerusalem and have a combined municipality for both while keeping the city undivided by barbed wires or whatever other (inaudible). Or even drawing a line. All of you, I'm sure, have been in Rome, and you have been to the Vatican. Do you see a line on the ground even between the Vatican and Rome [34:00] city? None. Yet there is an authority there in the Vatican and there is an authority in Rome and there is the co-living, and everybody is satisfied and happy and each one is exercising the temporal as well as the religious authorities in there. And I say we can, in our deliberations between political people, in our deliberations as we are helped by our religious insight or

teachings, find a solution to that problem in the manner that we are talking about. But if we are to adopt the technique that this is not negotiable, then what are you saying? You are saying either you come and sign on the dotted line or just forget it. And I say that [35:00] either course is a nonworkable course. Now, in -- when I heard my colleague and friend Epi Evron say what he said, I was happy to hear that the views of Israel when it comes to... their -- their point of view about having settlements or other building cities in Hebron and [Halir?] and others is not on biblical reasons, which is something that I read was a point that was being advanced by some of our Israeli colleagues in Israel. But it is on the desire and the feeling of attachment to the land. I say I am glad [36:00], because we have then one less of a religious problem to deal with. And now it is more of a political one. And thus, the politics, you can find the commonality of the middle ground. But in religion, the dogma has its weight and has its impact that makes it very difficult sometimes when the two point of views are in a clash among themselves.

So more than ever before, I feel that there is definitely, as we talk among each other, a commonality of ground that we can find resolution to all our political leaders.

[37:00]

EVRON: I have the great pleasure of sharing the platform with Ashraf Ghorbal very often these days. (laughter) I hope that people will take it to be when sometimes I'm asked about normalization of relations, that it will be a normal thing for us to appear together -- not just like Siamese twins, which is a peculiar thing. And --

GHORBAL: We're going steady now. (laughter)

EVRON: We're going -- (laughter) Well, when I look at my calendar, I was surprised at the number of times I find together with Ambassador Ghorbal in the immediate future. But I have to [38:00] respond to what he said about Jerusalem. Sometimes I feel when I debate with him that I am back home in the Knesset or somewhere, or the -- it's a pleasure to disagree with each other, and yet carry on together. No, Jerusalem is not like any other city -- not for us. And when it comes to -- I have to smile to myself when I heard Ashraf say about "either you sign on the dotted line and accept our point of view or you don't get an agreement." (inaudible) said that was very good up there, when he said that we have to get out of the whole of Egypt and take the settlements with us, or else there wouldn't be an agreement. As you know, it has been the policy of all previous Israeli governments that some

territorial changes will have to take place. [39:00] And indeed, Golda Meir rebuked and attacked (inaudible) for being weak, as far as -- strange as it may sound, and too forthcoming in accepting their demand of Egypt. So there are times when maybe the best compromise is not having a compromise, and the Egyptian president has shown us as they set a precedent for it in this case.

Much against our will and against our judgment, we did what our Egyptian friends wanted us to do, and we accepted their version of the border. I'm just mentioning it just [40:00] in order to put things in the perspective that not everything is a total compromise. Sometimes the compromise is accepting the point of view of the other fellow, if you feel that you really have to -- if you really want to reach an agreement.

I don't have to tell this group that for the Jewish people, for us as Israelis, Jerusalem is unique. I have no way of measuring whether it's more unique -- what are the ingredients that you can put in it to make it more unique to Christians or to Muslims or so on. But for us there's only one Jerusalem. There isn't a Mecca, there isn't a Rome. There's just Jerusalem. And we have shown during the

[41:00] twelve and a half, nearly thirteen years, the two have been in control there that we can combine the two, namely Israeli sovereignty and religious freedom, such as Jerusalem had never had before. I remember how it was with a sense of shock, about 14, 15 months ago, just before coming here, leaving for -- assuming my post here, and sometimes I wonder why on earth I ever accepted this post, but that's a different story for a different time. And I was taken around for the thousandth time, I suppose, around the old city, which I knew in my childhood and from which I was separated for 19 years. And we visited [Monzan?].

[42:00] And I didn't know, I must confess to you, until that day in December, 1978, that even under the British mandate, when Britain was in control, Christians were not allowed to enter the place which is related to the Last Supper. It was owned, controlled, by the [Dajani?] family, which I'm sure Ashraf knows was part of it. And they just did not allow anybody who was not a Muslim to get there. And not in -- under the British rule, it came to me as a total surprise. And it was only in June 1967 that that place was opened [43:00] to Christians to come in with the Jews to do that. We are very proud of the way that religious freedom is practiced in all the holy places in Jerusalem, including the Muslim places.

It sometimes creates difficult problems for the government of Israel. Of course, as you know, Temple Mount is, after all, the holiest of holies for us. And yet we do not allow Jews to pray in Temple Mount.

It's not an easy decision for the government of Israel to make, and even Prime Minister [Begin?] has held onto that decision, because this is a place which is under the control of the Supreme Muslim Council in Jerusalem, which [44:00] runs it, is responsible for it. But it is open at the same time to visitors from all over the world. But when it comes to religious practices, then it is the edict of the Supreme Muslim Council that counts, just as it is in all the other religious places.

So I feel that --

END OF AUDIO FILE