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N.J. rabbi leads Jews, Muslims on interfaith trip to Nazi concentration camps

Published: Sunday, August 15, 2010, 9:00 AM Updated: Monday, August 16, 2010, 3:17 PM

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CARLSTADT — The scenario might have seemed unlikely: prominent Muslims and Jews from the United States, trekking across the Atlantic in mournful, spiritual solidarity to visit two Nazi concentration camps. Together.

The trip to Dachau and Auschwitz, organized by a New Jersey rabbi, was meant to combat the rise in Holocaust denial that has popped up in various Muslim and non-Muslim circles around the world — and online — in recent years.

"The best way to convince someone about the truth of something is to let them see it for themselves and experience it for themselves," said Rabbi Jack Bemporad of the Center for Interreligious Understanding in Carlstadt. "I feel that it was important to take Muslim leaders who have a really significant following in the American-Muslim community."

Some of the eight imams on the week-long trip, which ended Thursday, had previously worked with Jewish groups in inter-religious dialogue. Only one of the eight, Shaikh Yasir Qadhi of New Haven, Conn., academic dean for the AIMaghrib Institute, had been quoted doubting the extent of the Holocaust in 2001, but he recanted long before the trip, saying his past views were based on misinformation.

CONDEMNING DOUBT

On Friday, a day after their return, the eight imams released a statement citing the six million Jewish deaths in the Holocaust, among 12 million Holocaust deaths overall. It added, "We condemn any attempts to deny this historical reality and declare such denials or any justification of this tragedy as against the Islamic code of ethics."

In interviews, the imams said the trip affected them deeply.

"The experience was overwhelming," Qadhi said. "It was a very moving experience for all of us imams, in particular myself. I had never seen anything like this. I was just



A.J. Goldmann/The Forward

Prominent American imams pray last week before the main monument at Dachau, during an emotional visit to Nazi concentration camps.

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Prominent American Muslim leaders and others walk through the gate of Auschwitz on their emotional visit.

overwhelmed throughout the entire trip. I was just overwhelmed at the sheer inhumanity of it. I could not comprehend how such evil could be unleashed."

Like other imams interviewed, he said the historical truth of the Holocaust should not be distorted by the Mideast tensions of the last 60 years.

"Politics should not play a role in historical facts," Qadhi said. "Whatever happened post-Holocaust should not diminish the evil that was the Holocaust. ... The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is very complicated. Let's leave

anti-Semitism out of it."

FACING REALITY

Some said the trip's most emotional part was seeing gathered collections of victims' hair, suitcases, and belongings.

"Almost everybody was in tears," said Imam Muzammil Siddiqi, of the Islamic Society of Orange County, Calif.

"I laid a wreath of flowers there at the wall and recited the words from the Quran which says killing one person is like killing all of humanity and saving one life is like saving all of humanity. I said, 'Here it feels part of us were killed. It's part of our human brothers and sisters.'"

Laila Mohammed, daughter of Imam W.D. Mohammed, the late leader of the American Society of Muslims, said that after seeing the collection of women's hair, "I just felt so chilled and sickened... After they killed them they already had a plan, and already had contracts with companies to use their hair.

"I felt the same thing I feel when I leave a janazah, a funeral, of someone who is in our family. I felt like I had just witnessed the loss of my family."

The imams said they also were moved by meetings with Holocaust survivors, and from seeing their tattooed identification numbers.

Also during the trip, which was sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Center for Interreligious Understanding, the imams met with the Roman Catholic Cardinal of Krakow and the chief rabbi of Poland, who hosted them for dinner Wednesday, the first night of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Some participants, including Hannah Rosenthal, the U.S. State Department's special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, said they felt the trip itself was of historical significance.

"I know of no other time that a group of imams experienced the camps, and prayed at the camps, and came out with a strong statement that condemns Holocaust denial, Holocaust justification, Holocaust comparison and anti-Semitism," Rosenthal said. "I know of no other time that's happened in history."

'POIGNANT' EXPERIENCE

The sight of Muslims praying at Dachau stopped other passers-by in their tracks, she said.

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opinion

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History aside, the trip — like all pilgrimages to concentration camps — was emotionally devastating, said Bemporad, the rabbi.

"It was painful," he said. "One of the most painful things was to see these imams, all pretty intelligent and sophisticated, absolutely bawling like children. They couldn't get over it, especially when they saw these children's clothes and children's shoes by the tonful. It was really poignant."

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silly_me

August 15, 2010 at 9:31AM

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Good article and kudos to the rabbi for organizing these trips.

But I was struck by this

The trip to Dachau and Auschwitz, organized by a New Jersey rabbi, was meant to combat the rise in Holocaust denial that has popped up in various Muslim and non-Muslim circles around the world — and online — in recent years.

There are very active Holocaust deniers with hundreds of posts on nj.com.

What's your policy on allowing Holocaust deniers to comment here?

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GreatSachem

August 15, 2010 at 10:02AM

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While what you say is true and while I personally feel the deniers are despicable, in my experience more good is done by shining a light on their hate than by censoring them. Let the world see them for what they are.

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shelton663

August 15, 2010 at 12:23PM

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What's omitted in this article and others are the millions of Poles, gypsies, and gays who perished in these camps. It's as if their lives were marginal.

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GreatSachem

August 15, 2010 at 1:32PM

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It was the Jews though who were the main target and the focus of the "final solution." And most of the Poles killed were jews.

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GreatSachem August 15, 2010 at 9:59AM

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I wonder how devout muslims view this since Mohammed himself slaughtered many jews. Whole towns of them in fact. It must cause some consternation for decent muslims. Wonder how they reconcile that?

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DaTruthUnvarnished August 15, 2010 at 10:02PM

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I often wonder how Jewish peoples reconcile the fact that they slaughtered women and children in order to rid Israel of the majority Muslim population. Or that their god, yahweh, ordered them in the bible to commit genocide against an entire population of peoples; sparing neither women or children - all were slaughtered. Only one prostitute was spared because she had assisted the Israelis in their genocide.

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silly_me August 16, 2010 at 12:44AM

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I wonder how devout muslims view this since Mohammed himself slaughtered many jews. Whole towns of them in fact. It must cause some consternation for decent muslims. Wonder how they reconcile that?

Probably the same way Catholics reconcile the fact that they slaughtered millions of Protestants and burned tens of thousands of witches.

The Muslims have no mark on their record as black as Innocent III's suppression of the Albigensians.

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dbs16 August 15, 2010 at 10:30AM

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why would you want to censor anybody simply because they do not believe something happened? I never understood this or the laws in Europe than can actually put a person in jail for denying it happened. It seems counterproductive and only reinforces their lame argument that the events are exxagerated and the truth censored.

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DaTruthUnvarnished August 15, 2010 at 10:04PM

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Truth needs no laws of censorship; Lies needs laws of censorship to keep the populace ignorant.

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divineworld2 August 15, 2010 at 11:15AM

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Why in the world would you want to censor this topic. All you are doing is making more people believe that "Jews have taken control of the U.S government and mainstream media".

I hope the rabbi is starting the process of peace in the middle east because we all need it.

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mofotrkr August 15, 2010 at 11:29AM

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lol your not allowed to think on your own and maybe not beleive the official numbers of the holocaust? and this is considered hatred? SORRY i dont beleive in official government #'s.. government would never lie LOL .. still looking for WMD"s in iraq under WH pillows, chairs, and even desks.

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Rich August 15, 2010 at 12:31PM



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The main problem was that the Jews had historically said there were 6 million killed in the Holocaust. While that may be true, that number also contained the infirm, homosexuals, gypsies, communists and others sent to the concentration camps. So technically no one knows what the real numbers were. Sadly mass graves are still found now in certain European areas to this day.

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yuckster

August 15, 2010 at 1:06PM

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13 million were killed. 6 million Jews (2/3rds of overall European population). Identified homosexuals, "intellectuals," Priests, Catholics, Slavs, Gypsies (huge percentage of them too), and any other identified "undesirable." 6 million were Poles. Not a good time if you weren't an Aryan (whatever that was) and didn't want to be a slave to the Nazi regime.

Didn't matter if one's father fought for Germany in WWI (as many Jews had) -- they were all deemed unpure and persecuted, shipped off, killed.

Bullets became too expensive - hence the gas chambers and a highly efficient death machine set up in parallel to Germany's military effort.

It's obviously very inconvenient for many to keep this memory alive but ironically, not Germany which truly owns and mourns its past. Similar, albeit smaller, genocides on Ukrainians by Stalin, Armenians by Turks, Darfur, Cambodia, etc. Mankind can be truly evil.

Worthwhile to celebrate our melting pot and the diversity of our strong society of Dutch, English, African, Irish, German, Italian, Polish, Jewish, Chinese, Japanese, SouthAsian, Arab, Mexican ancestries. A bit more friction some times, but it ultimately makes us a great country.

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yuckster

August 15, 2010 at 1:11PM

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chelseaguy

August 15, 2010 at 12:57PM

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On this date in 1947 India and Pakistan became independent after some 200 years of British rule. Have you any idea how many Muslims were killed by Hindus in the months following independence? Or Hindus by Muslims? Or Muslims by Crusaders in the Middle Ages. How about the number of Muslims killed by other Muslims: I dare say by the end of this day that number will be higher. In both World Wars in the last century, Christians happily killed other Christians. So it seems to me, no faith can claim moral superiority over the others.

Except the Jains in India, who sweep the streets to avoid stepping on ants and bugs in their path.

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N.J. rabbi leads Jews, Muslims on interfaith trip to Nazi concentration camps



By **Jeff Diamant/The Star-Ledger**

August 15, 2010, 9:00AM

CARLSTADT — The scenario might have seemed unlikely: prominent Muslims at Jews from the United States, trekking across the Atlantic in mournful, spiritual solidarity to visit two Nazi concentration camps. Together. The trip to Dachau a Auschwitz, organized by a New Jersey rabbi, was meant to combat the rise in Holocaust denial that has popped up in various Muslim... [Full story >](#)

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GreatSachem

August 15, 2010 at 1:38PM

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In the last war Christians did not happily kill other chrisitans BECAUSE they were Christian. To my knowledge, Mohammed is the only founder of a major religion that calls upon his followers to kill people of christian or jewish faith. He called them out by name. Should also mention that it was Islam that invaded the Holy Land and the Crusades were a response to that invasion.

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chelseaguy

August 15, 2010 at 12:58PM

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On this date in 1947 India and Pakistan became independent after some 200 years of British rule. Have you any idea how many Muslims were killed by Hindus in the months following independence? Or Hindus by Muslims? Or Muslims by Crusaders in the Middle Ages. How about the number of Muslims killed by other Muslims: I dare say by the end of this day that number will be higher. In both World Wars in the last century, Christians happily killed other Christians. So it seems to me, no faith can claim moral superiority over the others.

Except the Jains in India, who sweep the streets to avoid stepping on ants and bugs in their path.

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NJGfaninMD August 15, 2010 at 1:04PM

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As the article states "six million Jewish deaths in the Holocaust, among 12 million Holocaust deaths overall". Of the 12 million, 6 million were Jews. The Holocaust deniers don't have to take the word of Jewish leaders as to the numbers. They're there in Nazi documents. The Nazis kept very good records.

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trueblueinmd August 15, 2010 at 4:53PM

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Exactly, NJGfaninMD. Those records, at Auschwitz, included my great-grandmother.

Those documents were preserved, for the most part, along with the post-war records of the Allied armies that liberated the camps and the relief agencies that helped the survivors. The photographic record alone is huge. Dwight Eisenhower, then the commanding general of the Allied armies in Europe, made sure that the historical record would be detailed and very, very clear.

Denying the facts of the Holocaust springs from deliberate ignorance, or malice. There really isn't any other objective way to look at it.

At the same time, I don't believe in suppressing discussion of the question. Let the deniers have their say, as often as they please. This serves two purposes: first, the deniers always have an agenda that makes the denial necessary, and it's a good thing to be aware of that. Second, it makes the truth be repeated again, in response, which makes us remember the truth, and that, we can hope, will make sure that it will never happen again.

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silly_me August 16, 2010 at 12:42AM

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While what you say is true and while I personally feel the deniers are despicable, in my experience more good is done by shining a light on their hate than by censoring them. Let the world see them for what they are.

Censorship has to be consistent or not at all.

I've made anti-Teabagger and anti-Christie comments that were almost immediately pulled down. And yet the Holocaust denial statements stay up.

A lot of the Holocaust deniers here could be Muslims but they seem more like Hal Turner fans and general all around white nationalists to me.

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Freed McKahn August 16, 2010 at 8:53AM

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The Mosque has no Door to Stop you! By: M J Akbar - 16 August 2010

Can there be any rational reason for such subliminal fear of a house without a door? A mosque has no door; it is always open to anyone. Submission is the guiding force of its spirit and simplicity is its objective. There is equality in the lines of prayer.

Servant stands beside master to bow, at the same moment, before the Lord. Divisions and pretensions dissipate. The whole world, as the great Indian theologian and mass leader Maulana Abul Kalam Azad used to say, is God's mosque. Nations may claim to act in the name of God, but God does not need nations. A mosque is neither factory nor fortress: why should it arouse either envy or fear?

The opposition of some sections of the American right, led by politicians like Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin, to a mosque at the site of the 9/11 tragedy is bewildering, at the very least.

A war memorial is not built to perpetuate war. Its relevance lies in the promise of peace. It honors heroes who have given their lives, but this sacrifice, in the words of a famous testament, is ennobled by the promise that they gave their today so the living might have a better tomorrow. A

war memorial is a symbol of conflict resolution, not conflict enhancement. A mosque near the World Trade Center will epitomise the partnership necessary for a common struggle against the horror of terrorism and its evil masterminds, wherever they might live.

Is ignorance a reason for the right-wing campaign against the mosque? I was at the East-West Center in Hawaii a few years ago for a faith-media seminar. On Friday, our very considerate hosts offered Muslim participants a chance to join a local congregation for noon prayers in a small room where the minute local community gathered regularly for Namaaz and fraternity. Some non-Muslim colleagues came along because they had never seen a Friday prayer. We are all convivial, but I daresay at least one or two of them were relieved that the Imam had not declared war on the West and we had not unsheathed scimitars as part of ritual.

Ignorance is too generous an alibi for Gingrich and Palin. They have been candidates for the most powerful job in the world. It is foolish to dismiss them as fools.

A mosque at Ground Zero will interfere with their politics, in which the Muslim must be etched as an irredeemable zealot with manic eyes and foaming mouth; the mosque must be distorted into a fountainhead of hatred; and every Muslim be blamed for the sins of the few bigots and terrorists who perpetrated 9/11. A range of political forces has a vested interest in the myth of the mad Muslim as the last evil standing between civilization and chaos.

The irony is that Palin and Gingrich do not represent the idealism and philosophy of America, a nation that is liberal, open, democratic and secular. Gingrich is a false American; Palin is a falsetto American.

The true American patriot is Michael Rubens Bloomberg, the mayor of New York, who has supported the idea of a mosque. I use his full name deliberately: he is of the Jewish faith, from a family of Russian émigrés. Bloomberg reflects the idealism of America as well as the anguish and wisdom of his own heritage, of a people who have suffered the trauma of bigotry and threat of extinction for two millennia. He knows prejudice when he sees it; he understands the poison it injects into the human psyche; and he is willing to set aside the prospect of political advantage from hysteria in order stand on the side of justice. Those who gave Barack Obama a Nobel Peace Prize without much reason might want to consider Bloomberg for much better reasons. He has, in the process, also exposed organizations like the Anti Defamation League, who seem to have sold their principles for politics. Fareed Zakaria deserves our respect for returning the honorarium and First Amendment award given by the League.

Bigotry is not the exclusive property of any denomination; Muslims offer their share in the long list of self-appointed leaders who spawn the culture that leads to terrorism from pulpits, which desecrate the meaning of a mosque. But it is utterly self-defeating to blame Islam, or the vast majority of peaceful Muslims, for the sins of a few. Terms like "Islamofascism", George Bush's intellectual contribution to this debate, are meaningless gibberish. Islam is 1400 years old; fascism entered the dialectic only with Benito Mussolini. So whatever else Islam might be it cannot be fascist. True, there are some Muslims who are fascist, but why blame Islam for the tyranny of despots? No one blames the Roman Catholic Church for Mussolini.

Terrorists conspire. A conspiracy is hatched behind closed doors. A mosque has no door.

The columnist is editor of The Sunday "Guardian, published from Delhi

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trueblueinmd

August 16, 2010 at 5:51PM

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Little Hitler Ahmadinejad does not speak for all Muslims, or even, apparently, for anywhere near all Iranians. This is something for which we can indeed be thankful. Still, he speaks, and he speaks for a cadre of Islamic clerics. And the fact remains that too much of the world's terrorism, in recent years, has been inflicted by Islamist fanatics. It is simply not reasonable for Muslims to expect the rest of us to completely ignore these things.

Still, Mayor Bloomberg is right. There would have been hardly an eyebrow raised had either a church or a synagogue sought to occupy the site. The fact that the mosque disturbs some people doesn't affect the civil rights of the Americans seeking to build this mosque. This is exactly why civil rights exist!

The opposition, by Gingrich and Palin and their ilk, should not "bewilder" anyone. They are demagogues, unelected self-promoting personal enterprises that pander to the lowest fears of their audience. Their use of an "issue" like this, to stir up fear and divisiveness, has been entirely

consistent with their opportunistic approach to public discourse over some time and quite a few other topics.

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db51nyc

August 18, 2010 at 12:15PM

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1920 my jewish dad was born on cattle boat coming to nyc whos real father was killed by white or red army, then grandmother meeting up with new husband waiting for her at ellis island after she was brought to usa by same people who killed her real husband and set her up with new one. 1937 jewish german mom was born in palestine after parents escaped hitler from berlin. 1955 parents met in lakewood nj at club where mom was coat check girl and dad singer in his band. 1958 i was born jewish girl in brooklyn, ny flatbush. 1963 moved to lakewood nj just about time JFK killed. 1976 dad dies, mom sets me up with nazi who later takes kids away. 1981 divorced, lived all over nj, went to computer school worked for att, left nj in 1988 moved back to brooklyn, then nyc greenwich village. Today watching as fdny firebomb most of nyc and nj, noticed Carlstadt fire department here in da village nyc for one of their firebombing meetings, still keeping track of nazis on ssi that no one cares about.

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