

From Rabbi Bronstein

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### “Optics”

When I took on the two-year job of president of the New York Board of Rabbis, I knew it would entail some diplomacy in addition to overseeing the usual stuff: chaplaincy, interfaith dialogues, enrichment programs for colleagues, and so forth. But I incorrectly assumed that this so-called diplomacy would be of a blandly ceremonial nature.

I figured I would lead delegations of smiling rabbis into this or that UN mission or consulate; that I would appear at commemorations of holidays and quote a verse or two from the Torah; and that I would occasionally shake the Mayor’s and Cardinal’s hands with a hearty greeting from my fellow Jews.

Then came Pittsburgh, and New Zealand, and Sri Lanka, and Poway. One after another, these horrific affronts to human civilization compelled faith leaders to get up in front of cameras and show their solidarity.

In each case, my little team of rabbis would invite our closest contacts among the priests, ministers, and imams to go around offering condolence visits to the representatives of these countries and communities here in New York. We went to the main Islamic Center of New York. We went to the Sri Lankan mission to the United Nations. We went to Chabad World Headquarters in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. We went to the Irish and Turkish missions as well, in order to build coalitions with those nations around the cause of tolerance. We invited rabbis and police officers from Pittsburgh to dine with us and speak to us about what they felt we all needed to learn from their harrowing experience. We met with journalists from Asian countries touring the West under the auspices of the State Department to learn about our unique brand of ecumenical religious acceptance.

In each case, meaningful words were spoken. Scriptures from many traditions were quoted.

Expressions of comfort were offered. Hugs were given. Weeping clergy and diplomats shared Kleenex.

Then came the group photos.

Whenever I spoke at these gatherings, I always said more or less the same thing:

“We clergy from the rainbow of faiths and races in America and around the world already knew one another; we already knew that we respected one another; we already knew that our connection went far beyond tolerance – that it was a connection of the heart and mind.

“But the world doesn’t know this. The world thinks we don’t trust each other. The world thinks we encourage our followers to keep a distance. The world assumes that the contradictions between and among our faiths translates into rejection, if not outright hatred.

“Therefore,” I would say, “today we are creating optics. We are showing the world a confusing photograph. They think they can easily divide us because we are already divided. By standing together for this photo-op, we are showing them the truth: that we are unified on behalf of love and in opposition to hate.”

That’s the gist of my message to you as well. Our task is not to paper over the differences among our theologies and practices. It is, rather, to exemplify the best of our particular traditions, and to stand shoulder to shoulder with other traditions in solidarity. In this way, the bad guys will be confounded, for they will learn that they cannot divide our constituencies against one another when their leaders are always going around taking their pictures together, always with their hands clasped or their arms around each other in apparent friendship. Always with the shared human prayer that a picture really will convey a thousand words, and that violent expressions of hatred will soon fade away.

Until then, we will keep showing up together wherever they invite us in, and we will continue to defy assumptions until the truth wins out.

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