



The Fifth Bi-Annual Meeting of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, Oxford (UK), March 2012

On the final day of the meeting, leaders were asked to reflect on what had been accomplished. They were asked to consider three questions:

- 1. What does Interreligious Friendship mean to you?***
- 2. How do you practise Interreligious Friendship?***
- 3. What messages and practices of Interreligious Friendship can you take back from this meeting to your community?***

Some chose to respond independently to each question while others integrated their answers.

Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp



Interreligious friendship is my life.

In my parents' home, great leaders from Catholic, Protestant and Moslem spiritual traditions were part of one family. I cherish so many memories of Monsignor Ramselaar at our seder, of teaching Pastor Kroon, right after Bar Mitzvah, regularly, Hebrew, of sharing confidences with my professor of Bible, Piet de Boer van Goudoever, truly friends of my parents who became my own friends.

Shortly after my ordination, I travelled by train together with Imam Bashir. He took the opportunity to share with me, 'You have become my young friend. There is trust between us. And thus I am able to ask you factual questions that generally I would not dare to ask a Jew.'

One question referred to the attempt by an Australian tourist of disturbed mind to set fire to the El-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem. Bashir asked, 'Why do the Jews want to destroy our Mosque?' Our conversation from heart to heart took away all stumbling blocks or prejudice. And it gave me insight in one of the blessings of friendship, to feel free, unburdened to speak in the deepest, sometimes very painful frankness.

When I speak of friends, I realize that these are often people I have not maintained uninterrupted long-time friendships with but with whom my heart has been touched forever. There follow some names and experiences:

Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Kufaro: I spoke about our friendship on Monday night. I would like now to add how this friendship originated.

During a Board meeting of the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders in Moscow, just before the opening of the conference in January 1990, the Sheikh moved in, supported by his assistant and physician. It was the first time he joined us in his capacity as new co-chair. I thought it was strange that the meeting had stopped in



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order to welcome him. I asked my mother, of blessed memory, should I stand up to greet him or would that look ostentatious? And she answered, 'Don't make it difficult. Do what your heart tells you to do.'

I got up, stumbled forward, making noise, turning chairs and tables in the embarrassing attempt to reach him before he could sit down. And I introduced myself to him, welcoming him with expressed gratitude for our co-operation.

Years later, when we had celebrated our meetings and conversations, his assistant asked me, 'Do you know why you have such a deep relationship? It is because you got out of your seat.' Towards the end of his life, when unfortunately I had not been able to visit him in Damascus – at the last moment I would be refused a vision, I had a chance to meet with a world-renowned physician, who told me that he was going to a conference in Damascus. Knowing of the frail health of Kuftaro, I asked him whether he would agree to see him. He gave me his hotel details.

I called just before Shabbat, that Friday afternoon, his home in Damascus. I spoke to his wife, and gave her the details. She answered in surprise, 'You really called to share this information out of concern for my husband?' After my answer in the affirmative, there was a long pause. Then she cried and shared how moved she was.

When I write these lines, I am moved deeply, thinking of my older brother. In some way, I have found in my new brother, Ilyasi, whom I fortunately encountered forever in Amritsar, the continuation of the presence of Kuftaro, his memory be a blessing.

Reflecting further, I think of my friend from the East, Akio Matsumura, my gifted friend from Japan and New York. We met each other in a small room in 1987 in the house of Parliament in the Hague. And immediately a bond was established which has only been strengthened. It was on the basis of this friendship that the work of the Global Forum has flourished. I had found in his visionary works the combination of the mystery and commandment, the spiritual and practical, which echoed my life-long longing.

I think of Vaswani, the Hindu Guru, his wisdom and kindness. The very first time we met, during the Global Forum meeting, in Kyoto in 1993, he said to me, 'Can I be your student?' I answered him emphatically, 'I am honoured to be your student.' He replied, 'You who have gone through suffering but have not become bitter are my teacher.'

How did he know? What did he see? It has moved me till today.

In South Africa in 1991 at the Parliament of World Religions, I received the news that my aunt had received permission by doctors after a prolonged process of consultation required by the Dutch law, to terminate her life. (She had had a stroke and was very ill.) I went to Vaswani to take leave. He comforted me. Just before, he had made a comparison during one of his speeches, between the slaughter of animals and Auschwitz. It upset my colleagues deeply. I realized that while being disturbed by the terminology, it did not create a barrier. Just when I ventured to leave, I turned around and asked on an impulse whether I would be allowed to bless Vaswani. He smiled and bent his head. And I blessed him with the Biblical priestly blessing. When I opened my eyes, I saw that Vaswani had gone into meditation. I closed my eyes and joined the meditation. Slowly, an image appeared, an undulating blue water-surface that was surrounded by a beautiful, god, ever-enlarging circle. This was an abiding example of transference and fusion of different ways of prayer.



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During this beautiful encounter across religions, I realized the deep value of our efforts in the Netherlands over the years to organize an interspiritual gathering at the main church building in the Hague, hours before the opening of Parliament. It has grown to a true milestone of cooperation, attended by the Dutch cabinet representatives of all walks of life – over a thousand participants, among them hundreds of pupils.

The astounding assembly is veritably based on true friendship established over many years. Friendship is hard work. It is, when forged, the way to open the gate to the flow of loving long-standing cooperation. And this is the more important in Europe today, where a wave of populism is trying to sweep this good-will aside.

I am awed by the developments at this meeting of Elijah, which I consider the culmination of my experiences in the past. It is my privilege, together with Joseph, to suggest a far-reaching project in India and on the road to Rio de Janeiro, a project to foster the expressing of a unified voice for change in our behavior, towards a clean and just society.

The newly found friendships here strengthen my resolve to continue to strive for the impossible. Thus in a few hours I am going to suggest cooperation towards realizing a voluntary taxation of an extra 0.1% every year to help alleviate poverty and take measures to turn the climate-change cause into a blessing. It is to be done.