

Interfaith as a voice of social justice

“The interfaith community is a crucial conduit between the media and wider society,” said Cape Times Editor Gasant Abarder at a Cape SA Jewish Board of Deputies breakfast to mark World Interfaith Harmony Week.

The gathering brought together various faith leaders, interfaith activists and dignitaries, including US Consul-General, Erica Barkes Ruggles. It was the second such initiative hosted by the Cape Board, following last year’s successful breakfast at which Gift of the Givers founder, Dr Imtiaz Suliman, had been the keynote speaker.

Abarder was speaking on the topic ‘What role should the media play in promoting interfaith harmony?’, bringing to the fore the aims of HM King Abdullah II of Jordan, who proposed this at the United Nations in 2010, saying: “It is essential to resist forces of division that spread misunderstanding and mistrust, especially among peoples of different religions. What we are proposing is a special week during which the world’s people could express the teachings of their own faith about tolerance, respect for the other and peace.”

Abarder took this mission to heart, sharing his personal background to make this message even more meaningful: “I grew up in a Muslim household that was more tolerant than most. We were encouraged to have friends from all walks of life. I developed an interest in all three Abrahamic faiths and realised that although we call God different names, there is more that can keep us together than keep us apart.”

Abarder has also brought this perspective to his professional life. “It is important for this newspaper and the media at large to not only reflect the news of the day, but also to enrich the debate with different and diverse opinions.”

He explained that “We are guided by the South African Press Code, which advocates freedom of speech and freedom of expression” but emphasised how “this is tempered with responsibilities that include limiting harm and steering away from giving a platform to hate speech, discrimination, bigotry and prejudice, and to in turn placing a premium on values like tolerance of religious beliefs.”

Abarder discussed the important role that the interfaith community can play in combating societal ills. “Voices of faith can be voices of reason,” he said, and emphasised that the media should make sure these voices are heard. “You play a crucial role as a voice of our collective moral barometer, a guardian of values and social justice. Where does the media fit in? It is a conduit to reflecting this important voice in our democracy. But the only way we as media can do this is if you, the people involved in interfaith movements, remain relevant and address the issues that affront our democracy,” he said.

Delving into the part played by the interfaith community in the past, Abarder remembered “When South Africa was at its lowest point, at the height of the struggle against apartheid; it was the faith leaders who were an important voice against injustice. Ordinary men and women put their ideological and theological differences aside for the greater good. Some of the biggest heroes of our struggle were Muslims and Jews who fought alongside each other for a free South Africa –Ahmed Kathrada and Denis Goldberg for example.”

Modern day messengers

This role continued into the new South Africa, and Abarder noted how “in 2012, Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba established an anti-corruption movement and called on the major religions to participate under the auspices of the Western Cape Religious Leaders Forum.

“The religious leaders issued a stern warning to political leaders about their reluctance to deal with corruption. Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein said that the moral regeneration of society required that children should learn about the bill of responsibility at schools – that with every right comes a responsibility.

“And so, a multi-faith anti-corruption movement was born, where leaders of different religious persuasions spoke as one. A declaration for the call to end corruption was signed by 18 religious leaders in Cape Town. For very good reason, this powerful statement dominated front pages and news bulletins.”

Abarder pointed out the continuum between then and now, saying that “I believe it is the responsibility of organised religion to continue leading our struggle. But today this is a different struggle – against poverty, unemployment, corruption, indifference, discrimination, gender violence, women and child abuse, and the apathy many display towards active citizenry. When you as organised religion take up your rightful role and step into the fray, we will do our role as media and report on what you do and say, because we won’t be able to ignore your relevance.”

Abarder answered questions from the audience, which focused on the Cape Times strategy and editorial policy; and reporting on the Middle East. Regarding the former, he emphasised that new Independent Newspapers Chairman Iqbal Surve is investing in digital platforms, and that they want to “put digital first, and do print better.” In terms of editorial independence, Abarder emphasised that “there will be no editorial interference”.

Answering questions about reporting on the Middle East, Abarder said that he would like to see more focus on the atrocities happening in Syria, as opposed to reporting on Israel and the Palestinians just to grab attention. He said that he “believes in a two-state solution,” and that he will “always make space for different views.”

The gathering included comments from Cape Board Chair Gary Eisenberg, who emphasised that we must also work on ‘intra-faith harmony’ and unity within our own communities; and Gardens Shul Rabbi Osher Feldman, who told the crowd about the significance of tefillin: ‘The box worn on the head has four compartments, representing how all people think differently, and that we must be open to different perspectives. However the box worn on the arm only has one compartment, representing how when we take action and reach out to someone else, we are all the same.’

Coming back to the key question of the day, ‘What role, does the media play in promoting interfaith harmony?’ Abarder answered “A central one – because in a way, like the messengers of gospels of the divine word, we are modern day messengers with an obligation to the truth and justice. Speak as one about the issues that shape and define our world, and we will share your narrative.”

More photos can be seen on our [Facebook page here](#).

And edited version of Gasant Abarder’s speech which was published as an Op Ed the following day 7 Feb 2014 [can be read here](#).