

Three faiths converge on St Kilda synagogue

Yaakov Glasman, *The Age*, 31 July 2022

In 2016, I travelled to Parliament House from Melbourne at the invitation of Canberra's small Jewish community, stood in front of federal members from across the political spectrum and told them: "If my grandparents were standing here now, they'd be crying tears of joy."



State Deputy Opposition Leader David Southwick, Imam Wadood Janud, Catholic Archbishop Peter Comensoli, Rabbi Yaakov Glasman and Opposition Leader Matthew Guy looking at the Torah scroll at St Kilda Synagogue. CREDIT: PAUL TOPOL

My speech coincided with the festival of Chanukah and culminated in a candle-lighting ceremony symbolising the triumph of light over darkness. For my grandparents, darkness carried a uniquely disturbing meaning. All four of them were born in Poland and experienced the horror and inhumanity perpetrated by the Nazis during the Holocaust. They suffered – their parents and siblings were brutally murdered, rendering them orphans and the lone survivors of their families.

My grandparents saw their own government transform its military into a killing machine and annihilate two-thirds of European Jewry, inflicting unbridled hatred and cruelty on Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, gays, gypsies, people with disabilities, and others who were not part of the Aryan race.

Yet 70 years later, their grandson stood and spoke proudly as a Jew in the corridors of power of this incredible country – a country which took in four people whose sole desire was to move as far away as possible from the carnage that robbed them of their childhood. They worked tirelessly to contribute to Australian society and to raise their families in the safety and security which successive Australian governments provided.

It was my grandparents' story and my studies of the Holocaust and other genocides that inspired me to actively build bridges with other faiths. History illustrates that one of the primary causes of hatred is ignorance. Without developing relationships with those we

consider to be different, our perceptions of those people are too easily defined by stereotypes born out of prejudice. The more we engage with people who are different from us, the more we realise how un-different those people really are.

Last month, this truth was laid bare for me when I drove to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community mosque in Langwarrin. It had been disgracefully desecrated only a few days earlier. I met with their Imam, Wadood Janud, whose beautiful words filled this column last Sunday. I listened to his story and shared with him some of mine. I invited him to visit my synagogue in reciprocity, an invitation he graciously accepted.

We came full circle last week when the Imam and Catholic Archbishop Peter Comensoli converged in our iconic synagogue in St Kilda.

We representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – talked faith, community and politics and thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. We quickly realised just how much we all have in common.

Most importantly, our respective congregations saw in their leaders a willingness to not only co-exist but to proactively establish meaningful relationships.

And if engagement with other faith communities has taught me one thing, it's that the commonalities between different faith groups significantly outweigh our differences – so why should we focus on the latter?

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