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"New antisemitism" in Ontario: A Canadian-Iranian Perspective

By Navid Khavari

I am a Canadian citizen. However, I am also of Iranian descent and a member of the Bahá'í Faith. It may seem odd at first for someone of my background to feel compelled to comment on antisemitism in Ontario. But it is important to view the subject from as many angles as possible, to which I felt compelled to offer my own perspective. I will frame this submission on what I learned from visiting concentration camps firsthand in Poland and Germany as part of a program, The March of Remembrance and Hope in April 2009. This program caused me to reassess my own experiences with "new antisemitism", and has given me pause to suggest ways to counter the recent rise in acts of prejudice against the Jewish community in Ontario.

As a Bahá'í, my family understands what it is to be a persecuted minority. The largest religious minority in Iran today, Bahá'ís number around 300,000 and are treated as second-class citizens by the Islamic Republic of Iran, their religion deemed heretical due to its belief in a prophet after Islam's Muhammad, whom connected all prophets before (including Moses, Jesus and Muhammad) together. The Bahá'í Faith believes in such pacifistic notions as the elimination of war, the unity of mankind, and the elimination of prejudice. Yet the Bahá'ís, similar to the Jews of Nazi Germany, are blamed for the ills of Iran, continuously monitored and deemed spies of Israel and the United States. My parents were forced to flee Iran following the revolution there in 1979, however my grandparents and aunt who had remained were arrested and thrown into prison. All but my aunt would eventually be released. On June 18th 1983, she was killed by hanging with 9 other women, simply for refusing to recant her faith. It is with this tumultuous history that my family and I finally settled in Canada in 1987.

It is not simply to raise awareness on the Bahá'í issue that I have decided to submit a statement on antisemitism. From May 14th to the 21st of 2009, I traveled to Berlin and Poland for a 7-day intensive tour of concentration camps and memorials in an effort to study the Holocaust. It was because of my family history that I applied for the program, oddly enough, it was a vain attempt to try and understand what my aunt experienced at the hands of her captors. But this trip had a profound effect on me, not simply because it allowed me physical contact with areas in the world of great historical importance but it also allowed me to broaden my perspective on the universality of suffering. Time and time again I was struck at how the stories of the individual victims of the Holocaust felt connected to the victims from my own family. But perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this paper, I

Navid Khavari

came to the realization that there truly is not enough education in the schools of Ontario on the subject of the Holocaust and its global effect.

Was I expecting to be overwhelmed emotionally by the camps themselves? Of course; the sheer enormity of the camps, the mechanisms of death that remain intact, the gas chambers, the empty barracks having housed thousands of victims, the museums at Auschwitz and the stone memorials in Treblinka, all of these moments in Poland and Germany accumulated to an overwhelming cacophony of suffering that rang between my ears. This was a normal reaction. But it was decisively *not* normal, in my opinion, that I should have been so overwhelmed intellectually by the information I was receiving. I was consistently shocked and surprised at how little I knew on the subject, even though I had completed a course on the Holocaust at the University of Toronto a semester before. It is important to stress here that I don't simply believe there is a lack of physical data available to students; on the contrary, the Holocaust is treated sometimes as an equation to be solved. But there is a severe lack of information in regards to the victims themselves, as individuals, as persons of culture, each with their own story and historical weight, and it was in this field that I felt particularly uneducated.

The trip made me realize that the victims of the Holocaust were not just a large group who suffered greatly; clearly this is true, but they also all had stories that were important, and deserved to be heard. We were fortunate enough on the trip to have two survivors with us, and despite their graciousness, I felt completely helpless to the pain they were feeling. Yet I knew I had the opportunity to listen, and it saddened me that so many of these stories continue to remain unheard, or are treated flippantly as being lost in the larger picture that is the Holocaust. I could not understand why these survivors were not invited to visit schools, were not approached to tell their stories to as many people they could. This leads us to an extremely important point, in that even if one has issue with how the State of Israel conducts itself, there is a much higher probability of prejudice if the history of the country is not understood. The Holocaust itself and the creation of the state of Israel are intertwined, and have a profound effect on the global political arena; if the study of the Holocaust is inadequate in schools, and the Jews both in Ontario and elsewhere are kept separate from our own understanding of history, then there is a greater risk of children being clouded by bias, misinformation and stereotypes that lead to a harmful image of the Jewish culture.

The "new antisemitism" where prejudice against Jews as a people is thinly veiled in protest against the actions of Israel is not surprising. Hate is the potentially deadly spawn of ignorance and ignorance is begotten by a profound lack of education. Upon my arrival home, I felt an overwhelming obligation to tell everyone everything I had seen. Knowing that swastikas are painted on gravestones in my own province, let alone my own country is disturbing. Knowing that there are those who would twist disapproval over Israeli government decisions into a vindictive attack on the Jewish people as a whole is disturbing. Knowing that at the University of Toronto, a place meant to be a den of learning, patience and freedom, I personally have been witness to vicious shouting matches condemning Jews as "New Nazis" remains disturbing. I'm not suggesting the suppression of protest, debate or differing opinions, quite the opposite, my view is that all sides must be

heard equally, in a safe space. So too I recognized that there was a lack of quality discourse on the campus I attended. As an Iranian Canadian, I felt, perhaps controversially, that I had even more of a responsibility to tell others about the experience, as if I had something to prove. I have had Jewish friends hesitant to get to know me simply because of my heritage and the image portrayed in past media of all Iranians as blindly following the Islamic Republic of Iran. I know I'm not the only Iranian Canadian that feels this way, but I get the sense that opportunities to understand Jewish history, and perhaps more importantly, the Jewish perspective on global events are being squandered for Iranians in this country.

To understand the dangers I have experienced in school of the easy steps to "new antisemitism" I will provide an example. In a tutorial during my fourth year of university, there was a discussion of the statements made by the President of Iran about the destruction of the State of Israel and a recent Holocaust denial conference held in Iran. The debate was not very heated, but one student felt compelled to mention that he had heard that the name of the conference held in Iran had been mistranslated, and made the severe academic leap of suggesting that the conference perhaps wasn't intended to deny the Holocaust, and that the global media was positioning it in such a way. In my eyes, this is exactly where a quest to play the devils advocate in discussions inadvertently pandered to an extreme viewpoint. It is well-known that the conference in Iran was an attempt at Holocaust revisionism, and yet a student felt it was important to note that despite this *the name* of the conference was what mattered, not the subject matter. It is only now, following my trip to visit the sites where the Holocaust actually occurred, that this example was brought into focus in my mind. Furthermore I now understand how antisemitism has an ability to intertwine itself in condemnations of Israeli governmental actions.

How can this be remedied? As a recent university graduate, I remember clearly my experiences in middle school, high school and university and how, even as a child, I knew there was a fear from faculty, particularly in my younger years, to engage in discussion of serious issues in a meaningful way. It is clear that it would be impractical and naive to think the Canadian government could simply send scores of students to visit camps and memorials in Europe, but there are clearly gaps in schooling that could easily be filled. Understanding global politics is definitely important, it is necessary for students to be aware of what is happening in the Middle East. But this should be coupled with an understanding of cultures, of history. It is too easy for those committing these recent crimes to resort to antisemitic stereotypes and beliefs as a means to cover up a lack of education.

A bigger emphasis on helping programs such as the March of Remembrance and Hope, -whether through funding or other means- is critical to engaging the intellectual capabilities of students across Canada. Moreover, pursuing programs that aim for an understanding of the Holocaust and the Jewish culture in Ontario schools would do a great deal in simply allowing students to approach the topic of Jewish history without distance and trepidation. Perhaps most importantly, I would suggest such initiatives should begin in middle school (grades 7 and 8), and be taken seriously in order to emphasize the need for an understanding of the various cultures in Canada from a young age. By the time teens are in high school, many of their beliefs have already begun to take shape, and building an understanding of any

cultural history must begin early. I only wish that our education system would treat prevention of prejudice as importantly as it does sports, or the arts, or music. Whether one wishes to admit it or not, students are molded and influenced by a system and many are being sold short.

Canada may be classically defined as a mosaic, but sometimes I wonder if that is such a great thing. A mosaic entails a collage that is still separated, and while assimilation may not be the answer, a greater emphasis on understanding cultures from an early age would be a start for students to learn to recognize the pitfalls and dangers of antisemitism and prejudice. Ultimately, there should be focus on helping programs such as the March of Remembrance and Hope continue its important work and funding similar programs, who seek a deeper understanding of human rights around the world, both historically and in the present. Students must begin to gain a broader perspective on the potential for understanding and peacefulness globally. It is only as a concerned Canadian citizen that I write this, in the hopes that there can be a renewed focus on bringing citizens and their cultures together to engage in critical dialogue from a young age, up until entering the world as an adult. A fair conversation, unaffected by bias and prejudice, is the foundation stone of an Ontario released from the horrors of “new antisemitism.”