

# COMMENT & FEATURES

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MARC SCHNEIER, "We cannot afford to allow the extremists and the fundamentalists to win out, or we're all going to suffer." (Jeremy Wimpfheimer)

## If Muhammad doesn't come to the mountain...

Foundation for Ethnic Understanding president Rabbi Marc Schneier draws upon his experience in bridging the black-Jewish gap to create cooperation with Muslims to combat anti-Semitism and Islamophobia

People who think they know me assume I will eventually run for political office," says Marc Schneier, indirectly referring to his long-standing reputation for activism, which has gained him much celebrity on the talk-show and lecture circuit. And, oh, he also happens to be the outgoing chairman of Israel's ruling party, Kadima USA. "People who really know me, however, grasp that my true passion is being a rabbi — one who takes pride in being completely accessible to my congregants."

This would seem an avowedly tall order for someone who established and holds two pulpits, the New York Synagogue in Manhattan and the Hampton Synagogue in West-Hampton Beach — both of which, he boasts, are "standing-room-only" packed every Shabbat. And "strictly Orthodox," with a subtle separating the men from the women and all.



WITH BETHLEHEM

That a renewal of Jewish community life has been going on in the Big Apple for some years now is not a hot news flash. Nor is the fact that many of the city's affluent Jews own lavish summer houses in the Hamptons. Still, it is enlightening to hear Schneier was poetic about his Long Island beach.

"There are more than 1,000 people at that *shul*," he asserts enthusiastically, summing up the situation with a quip: "I'm a modern-Orthodox rabbi with a Conservative congregation and a Reform membership" — which, he adds, "is what Orthodox Judaism in America was 30-40 years ago."

Schneier says he "green-lights" the first *mitzvah* (ritual bath) in that part of the hamptons, and is in the process of erecting an *eruv* (a boundary within which Jews are allowed to carry items on Shabbat). His latest boost for the observant beach comes in a Shabbat scooter, for people who are physically or geographically challenged in terms of making it to prayers on foot.

At this point in his hour-long interview at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem — Schneier is spending *Hol Hamoad Pesach* here — his wife, Tobi, stops by after a workout at the gym and invites me to come and see how wonderful services are in the Hamptons. "We have *maritzim* and *noivim* for *loshon hora*," she says laughing by way of entitlement, and then elaborates with a telling anecdote: "The newest request is that we have cup holders installed in the scooters for the *cektails*."

Making sure his *loshon hora* and other needs are met may be, as Schneier claims, at the top of his priority ladder. Nevertheless, it is only one of many

rungs he occupies. You don't get ranked by *Newsweek* and the *Forward* as among America's most influential rabbis and among its most prominent Jews merely by singing to the choir, so to speak. (And while on that topic, the cantor at Schneier's Manhattan synagogue is none other than mega-star Dovid Fisher.)

Indeed, much of what the 49-year-old president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding (FEU) does focuses on reaching out to populations who have been less-than-friendly to Jews, and — he would assert — toward whom the Jews haven't been too tolerant, either.

The celebrity rabbi and author of *Shared Dreams — Martin Luther King, Jr. & the Jewish Community* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), clearly comes by his hunger for this kind of endeavor honestly. His father is Arthur Schneier, the rabbi of New York City's Park East Synagogue, whose most recent claim to fame was the historic visit to his *shul* by the pope.

Schneier the son, however, has carved out his own "cooperation" niche, which originally involved setting his mind to mending "downward-spiraling" black-Jewish relations, and which now has him turning his attention to Muslim anti-Semitism and Jewish Islamophobia.

To this end, Schneier's newest venture is a TV commercial — cosponsored by the FEU and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) — to promote Muslim-Jewish dialogue. Scheduled to air in September and October, during Ramadan and the High Holy Days, it will show a group of six rabbis — Schneier among them, — and six imams condemning prejudice against Muslims and Jews, and intolerance between

black-Jewish relations. In fact, my book documents Martin Luther King Jr.'s relationship with the Jewish community. It was around that time that black-Jewish relations had hit their lowest point. After King's assassination in 1968, it spiraled downward.

Is that when black anti-Semitism emerged? Black anti-Semitism began to emerge about two years before the assassination, and it increased after the Six Day War, when the militant wing of the African-American community began to identify with the Palestinians. This continued through the 1970s and 80s. By 1991, it essentially imploded in Crown Heights [The famous Brooklyn, New York riot was precipitated by the accidental hitting of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Later that evening, black began to attack Jews in the neighborhood].

And who were the leaders of the black community then? Political activist and Baptist minister, the Reverend Al Sharpton, [civil rights activist, the Reverend] Jesse Jackson, [Nation of Islam acting head] Louis Farrakhan and Black studies professor known for his anti-Semitic views Leonard Jeffries.

So things were very, very bad. And when I first got involved in this work, I was vilified in the Jewish community — it was called the "white Sharpton."

"The situation had spiraled out of control. But I was determined. I saw my great challenge in trying to identify the more moderate voice. Now, 18 years later, I sit here with harmony and optimism. Today, the state of black-Jewish relations is one of cooperation. Even Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson have undergone a transformation. There's been a whole sea change."

**How do Muslims fit in to this?**

I have to credit my friend, colleague and partner [hip-hop mogul and chairman of the FEU] Russell Simmons, who was the one who pushed me to turn my attention to Muslim-Jewish relations. He pointed out that we have offices all over America for black-Jewish and other inter-ethnic relations. So, now, how are we going to bring Jews and Muslims together?

It's been a very enlightening experience. We've held a number of events that led up to what we're doing now. For example, the imam of the great mosque of New York, Omar Namous, came to speak

**'I view the current conflict in the Middle East as a theological, not a political, one'**

Doesn't today's Islamic ideology make Jewish-Muslim dialogue difficult, if not impossible?

The key to interreligious dialogue is finding a path to narrow the chasm. I have quite a bit of experience in scaling mountains that is virtually insurmountable. I spent years working on

### ONE ON ONE

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at my New York City synagogue, and then I went to his mosque. Granted, he spoke of a one-state solution — and need-was Israel. Now, though I'm progressive in my views, I am a passionate when it comes to Israel. No one messes with it. Still, I reciprocated the visit.

Then, last November, we convened the first national summit of rabbis and imams (cosponsored by the FEU and the Islamic Cultural Center of New York). It was a very impressive group with the head imams of mosques all over the country coming together with a whole group of rabbis. At one point during the summit, the rabbis asked the imams why we haven't been hearing their moderate voices. And they said, "We need your help in projecting a more moderate and centrist voice."

**How can you possibly help moderate Muslims find their voice if their mosques are filled with Wahhabite literature, provided and funded by Saudi money. Even the Islamic Society of North America, with which you are cooperating, is financed by the Saudis.**

Yes, but the ISNA completed a major joint project with the Reform Judaism movement. It was also one of the sponsors of the commercial.

You know, it's always easy to pick the lowest-hanging fruit. But that's not the way I operate. I think you fight your battles from within. And I have the sense that something is actually moving. This sense is due to the work of ISNA and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), which recently had its national dinner, during which it honored [2006] Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, and invited me to speak — and to the letter to Islamic scholars calling for peace and understanding with Jews, and to the Saudi king's recent statement about the possibility of having a trilogue in Saudi Arabia. There is definitely something happening here. And I went through the same process when working on black-Jewish relations.

**But is it really the same process? Black-Jewish relations involved racial issues, social tension and ethnic misunderstandings. Radical Islam hates its extremist and anti-Semitism on Koranic texts calling for global jihad against the "infidels."**

I couldn't agree with you more. In fact, I view the current conflict in the Middle East as a theological, not a political, one. It is also my conviction that the overwhelming majority of Muslims are moderate and centrist in their views, that the religion has been hijacked by fanatics and extremists, and that therefore we must

help the moderates take back their religion. Because, ultimately, if their religion continues on this path, it is going to implode. Now, I wouldn't say there are major quakes taking place within Islam, but there definitely are tremors. Take Shamsi Ali, the new imam of the great mosque of New York, for example — a mosque financed by the Saudis and the Kuwaitis. He came to my synagogue a few weeks ago — on the Shabbat before Purim [known as Shabbat Parashat Zohar], when we read about Amalek ["Remember what Amalek did to you in the way where you went out of Egypt. That they encountered you on the way, and struck the hindmost, all that were weak at the rear, and they did not fear God. Therefore it will be, when the Eternal, your God, gives you relief from all your enemies, all around, in the land that the Eternal, your God, is giving to you as an inheritance to possess, if then you shall wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens; you must not forget." (Deuteronomy 25:17-19)].

And not only did he come to my synagogue on that day, but he was unequivocal in his speaking of Israel's territorial integrity, and minced no words on how suicide bombings and terrorism are perversions of Islam and of the Koran. People in the congregation were overwhelmed.

**But does he make such statements before his own congregation?**

Yes. But I'm not trying to paint some Pollyanna-like picture here. I don't know if we're going to see any real change in our generation. What I'm saying is that so far, whatever it is we have been doing is simply not working. And we have to take into account that the US is changing demographically. Demographics are forecasting that within 50 years, the current minorities in America will

constitute the majority, and that the American-Muslim population will surpass the American-Jewish population.

It is said about me that the way I deal with blacks and Muslims is the way my father deals with the Church: *Life's father is Rabbi Arthur Schneier of the Park East Synagogue, where Pope Benedict XVI visited on April 18. It was the first-ever visit by a pope to a US synagogue.* Speaking of which, the pope's coming to New York was very controversial within the American-Muslim community. I was asked by a reporter whether I agreed with Muslim resentment over the pope's not visiting a mosque. I said, "I appreciate what they're saying."

The reporter then asked whether I would have joined Muslims in speaking out about it. I said, "That's exactly where our target lies — in the American tradition coalition and alliance building, where we don't fight our battles alone. We should only be in such a situation where Jews and Muslims are that close that they would fight their battles and they would fight ours."

There is some irony here. During the filming of our commercial, the Islamic leaders with whom we were working on it said they felt more comfortable producing this commercial with rabbis than meeting with the head of the Roman Catholic Church. One does get the sense

that Jews and Muslims have more in common than

Muslims and Christians or Jews and Christians. We are the children of Abraham, after all.

**Still, Jews and Christians share the same faith, while Muslims do not.**

But one thing we share is a common father. And not only do we share a common faith, we also share a common fate.

**'One does get the sense that Jews and Muslims have more in common than Muslims and Christians or Jews and Christians. We are the children of Abraham, after all'**

**A common fate in the Middle East, you mean?**

In the Middle East and globally, we cannot afford to allow the extremists and the fundamentalists to win out, or to speak. (And while on that topic, the cantor at Schneier's Manhattan synagogue is none other than mega-star Dovid Fisher.)

**One complaint on the part of dissenters — and women — from Islamic regimes is that Americans who are interested in cooperation end up actually hindering the ability of the moderates to raise their heads.**

I happen to agree. If there's any lesson we must take away from the debacle in Iraq, it is that we cannot impose our will on others. And that, ultimately, this battle has to be fought from within. Look, the US brought down the Soviet regime without firing a single shot. What did it do? It was our propaganda, and the fact that we were able to expose our way of life and our values to so many people and connect to the silent majority.

**COMING BY cooperation honesty.**

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ty. And I believe that in Islam there exists such a silent majority. The same went for black-Jewish relations in the past. The problem was the African-American community, but rather its leadership. And we needed to help the black community develop a new leadership and an atmosphere in which the moderates could be marginalized and the Obamas emerge.

**As a religious leader yourself, how do you come to terms with the tweaking of the religion of someone else?**

When the imam came to my synagogue, the moderator of the program [hip-hop mogul and chairman of the FEU] Russell Simmons, who was the one who pushed me to turn my attention to Muslim-Jewish relations. He pointed out that we have offices all over America for black-Jewish and other inter-ethnic relations. So, now, how are we going to bring Jews and Muslims together?

I answered by quoting Maimonides, who said that the imam made the statements he did, very publicly, at our synagogue — when he knew where his funding is coming from — indicates that something positive is happening, and we have to take the opportunity. It's a race against time, but we don't have a choice.

**But American Muslims who are moderate have complained in private that it is getting harder and harder for them to find mosques that don't preach hatred and Wahhabism.**

As I mentioned, the great mosque in New York — the largest in the country — is funded by Saudi and Kuwaiti money. And Saudi Arabia and Kuwait themselves are countries which are having their own issues right now with extremist Islam. So, you know, that also works in our favor. The fact that the imam made the statements he did, very publicly, at our synagogue — when he knew where his funding is coming from — indicates that something positive is happening, and we have to take the opportunity. It's a race against time, but we don't have a choice.

**You nevertheless equate anti-Semitism with Islamophobia, correct?**

That's the equation we made in the commercial. And, for American Muslims, I think it's a real one.

**What constitutes Islamophobia?**

Racial profiling. Seeing a Muslim and assuming he's the next one to carry out a terrorist attack. And I think the Jewish community has to be at the forefront of combatting such phenomena. We Jews have always championed the causes and the issues of others. Where I personally come in is in making it clear that the door swings both ways. There's a quid pro quo.