Building Respect for All

An Interview with Abraham H. Foxman,
National Director, Anti-Defamation League (ADL)

EDITORS' NOTE *Abraham Foxman has held his current post since 1987. He is the co-author of* Viral Hate: Containing Its Spread on the Internet *and author of* Jews & Money: The Story of a Stereotype, The Deadliest Lies: The Israel Lobby and the Myth of Jewish Control, *and* Never Again? The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism. *Foxman has had consultations in Europe, Russia, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, China, Japan, South Africa, and Argentina, as well as with Palestinian leaders, on problems of ethnic hatred, violence, terrorism, and promoting democracy. He has had six audiences with Pope John Paul II, four with Pope Benedict XVI, and recently met with the newly installed Pope Francis. A Holocaust survivor, Foxman was a member of the President's United States Holocaust Memorial Council, appointed by Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton. He has been a participant of official Presidential delegations to special events in Europe and Israel. Foxman has a B.A. in political science from the City College of the City University of New York, graduating with honors in history. He holds a J.D. degree from New York University School of Law, and did graduate work in advanced Judaic studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary and in international economics at The New School for Social Research. He joined ADL in 1965.*

Abraham H. Foxman

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *The Anti-Defamation League (adl.org), founded in 1913, is the world's leading organization fighting anti-Semitism through programs and services that counteract hatred, prejudice, and bigotry.*

How has the ADL evolved since its early days?

A few lawyers in Chicago had a vision 100 years ago. They decided there was a need for an organization to fight what they primarily called "the defamation of the Jewish people." Then they determined that you can't just fight anti-Semitism in the American environment without fighting other forms of hatred and prejudice. They immediately set two goals: fight the defamation of the Jewish people and fight for equal opportunity for all citizens. Ironically, in 1913, "citizens" covered everybody; we just removed the word "citizens" because it's limiting today.

Our work hasn't evolved – it has remained true to its dual mission, always understanding you can't fight just the prejudice against Jews without fighting for the rights of others. If you don't change the environment against racism, bigotry, and prejudice – if you don't build respect for all – you will not succeed in protecting the rights of the Jewish people.

Some say I have extended the vision, but I haven't; it has always been there. The things that make news are when we speak out on anti-Semitism or when we strike out against racism and bigotry.

The guts of our institution is education. We have programs to teach diversity and respect, which we conduct with the religious community, with the law enforcement community, with teachers, with administrators, with college students, etc. The bulk of what we do is inoculating against prejudice and the only antidote we know is education. In education, our program is still generically anti-bias.

Another thing that has happened in the years I have been in charge is that other groups that face prejudice have developed institutions of their own. The Jewish community established the NAACP. There were times when there were no serious institutions fighting for African-American rights, Hispanic rights, gay rights, Asian rights – today, there are. We now work in coalition with them when it comes to advocacy and legislation, and even litigation.

There are a few achievements that I'm most proud of: one came before me, and that is the anti-mask law; another is anti-boycott legislation; and the third is the anti-hate law.

In the 1950s, the Anti-Defamation League drafted, advocated, promulgated, and got a law passed in the State of Georgia that said, you cannot demonstrate publicly with a hood or a mask which, ironically, was the most significant law that undermined the Klan because the First Amendment guarantees you and me the right to be bigots.

Our social environment, however, says you can be a bigot, but you have to take responsibility for your bigotry. When we removed the mask from the bigot, the Klan began to shrink, because all these champions of racism, who were political leaders and churchgoers, weren't so brave when they were unmasked.

That piece of legislation, which was challenged as a restriction on freedom of speech, was upheld by the Supreme Court 9-0, and it went a long way in unmasking the bigots.

Another significant achievement in the 1970s was the passage of anti-boycott legislation. At the time, there was a serious economic boycott of Israel. American citizens doing business in the Arab world had to submit boycott information, and it began to spill over on Jews as well because they were automatically seen as Zionists and supporters.

This was significant legislation, which said to the world, America will not permit American businessmen to be blackmailed or threatened by counter-boycott when they deal with whoever they want – in this case, Israel and the Jews.

The third one was the hate crimes law, finally passed by Congress nearly five years ago as the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act. In this country, where we are open about who and what we are, and about our attitudes towards hate, it wasn't easy to get this legislation passed in Congress. It did not make hate a crime, but it put a consequence on it. For instance, if you commit arson for the insurance payoff, the penalty is one year and $1,000; but if it can be proven that you committed that arson because of racism or bigotry, then the penalty is $2,000 and two years of prison.

This legislation reinforces that our society puts a higher consequence value on crimes motived by hate. When you're acting out against an individual motivated by hate, it's not just a crime against that individual but also against society.

We fight anti-Semitism all over the world. When I came to ADL, the level of anti-Semitism in the U.S. as we measured it was at 30 percent; today, it's down to 12 percent.

It would be nice to think that this is what we alone have achieved. Although there were many involved, I do think we had a significant role in it. But the most important thing that differentiates the U.S. from the rest of the world is that while anti-Semitism is rising there, here it's declining. In this country, while it's legal to be a bigot, there are consequences. The price of those actions will come from the public, which will react.

In Europe, being a bigot might be politically expedient. Here, if you're in commerce and you engage in anti-Semitism, you won't

sell a thing. Mel Gibson went from an active People's Choice Award-winning performer to someone who is rarely seen because he exposed his anti-Semitic bigotry.

There is also more of a message of tolerance coming from political and religious leadership in the U.S.

Educating law enforcement on hate has also made a difference, but our work is not done. We're not immune to the recurrence of hate. Until we have a vaccine, we have to remain active and educate people to make sure that the lids remain on the sewers, because the virus still lurks there, as unacceptable and immoral as it is.

So you feel this is still a significant issue globally?

Anti-Semitism globally, sans the U.S., is probably the worst it has been since World War II. As the memories of the war fade, there is a growing acceptance of it.

We're in the midst of creating a global index of anti-Semitism, which we'll probably release in about two months. The preliminary findings are disturbing.

Another element we have to consider is the advent of the Internet. The Internet puts the mask back on the bigot. Today, anti-Semitism and bigotry flows through the global channels of the Internet in nanoseconds, where it is protected by anonymity and never dies. Some of the anti-Semitism and racism we see today is a function of the fact that you have a way to deliver it. It appears on computers and tablets via social media, which give it a sense of legitimacy and truth because so much of our information now comes from that stream.

Consider the issue of bullying. The ADL has always seen bullying as bigotry. Cyber-bullying has even caused suicide.

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When we battle anti-Semitism today, one of the factors we have to address is this new superhighway. While we can use it to answer and as an antidote to educate, we're still struggling with a changing paradigm: In the old days, when someone wrote a hate letter, the answer to that bad speech was good speech. But what if you wake up and suddenly there is a tsunami of bad speech? How do you answer it, and how do we work to stop that tsunami without harming civil liberties?

The Internet has had many positive attributes that have been a great boon to society for learning, for research, and for communication. But unfettered freedom of speech unleashes a lack of civility. When people stop talking to each other face to face, they become less civil. As the level of civility goes down, it impacts respect and tolerance.

Are you able to evaluate the impact of your education efforts?

It's not an exact science, but we need to have faith in the principle.

We know that some of the young people we have worked with have changed how they see themselves and changed the way they live their lives in terms of self-respect, and in valuing who they are. These young people touch friends and family, and that message reverberates.

There is some measure in what we do, but at day's end, I firmly believe that if we weren't doing what we are doing, there would be a lot more hate.

The product of our business is words. Out of Jewish tradition and history, we have learned that words are very important. Jews who pray repeat three times, "keep my mouth from speaking evil," because in our tradition, life and death is in the power of the tongue.

We have learned from Jewish history. The gas chambers in Auschwitz did not begin with bricks but with words – ugly, hateful, demonizing words. The absence of words to counter those negative ones permitted these words to become bricks in a crematorium.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 didn't begin with box cutters or flying planes; they began with words demonizing America. In the society where the suicide bombers came from, no voice said, "What are you doing? This is wrong."

There are more good people than hateful people in this world. The trouble is that bigots operate 24/7. My mission is to discover the catalyst that makes good people stand up and say "no" to the bigots.

I survived the Holocaust because there was a woman who risked her life to save mine. When you ask people such as her why they did such things, they often say they didn't think they were doing anything extraordinary.

I would hope that in the future, we can identify what is it in the DNA that makes some collaborators apathetic while others stand up to act. Maybe it's their education or faith, but it takes an element of courage.

I tell kids that when they hear an ethnic slur or when they see bullying, they should stand up and say, "Don't do that." It sounds simple, but it's very tough in an environment where your peers are on the other side.

If we can find those buttons to press that will stimulate good people to take action, our job will be done.

Maybe in the grand scheme of things, I haven't removed bigotry, but in a micro sense, I am working to change it one person at a time.

People ask why I'm out there challenging bigots who may be actors, baseball players, whomever. My answer is, because they're role models. If I don't challenge their bigotry, how can I ask a 10-year-old to have the courage to stand up?

I'm still an optimist. If I didn't believe I could change people's minds and hearts, I would not go to work.

Are there moments you reflect on all you've accomplished or are you always looking ahead?

If you reach out to bigots and you see them change, these are wonderful victories. Young people are a very challenging audience and, after you're finished, they want to be hugged and take a picture. I didn't give them money or success; I gave them a sense that they could make a difference. So I feel satisfaction almost every day.

If I can bring a politician to a point of understanding and recognition of what is wrong, and they can become an ally, it's worthwhile.

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Having survived the Holocaust as a child, I don't have a right to be a pessimist.

I'm willing to give bigoted people the benefit of the doubt if they're willing to say, "I made a mistake." If people deny they are bigots, there is nowhere you can go. Once they accept they are, there is a path towards rehabilitation.

You have announced that you will retire in 2015. Are there mixed emotions?

Of course, but after 50 years, it's time to leave and let somebody else do this important work. I hope to have a voice in public life, but it's better to step down while you're still at the top of your game. ●