

Three Apples and a Banana

There must be a name for the person who sits down at his Hilton hotel breakfast plonking his iPhone, iPad and iPad mini down on the table and peels a banana. Whatever that name is, it isn't flattering.

I'm in Vienna at the KAICIID (King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Inter-religious and Inter-cultural Dialogue) Global Forum.

The flight on Emirates through Dubai was most comfortable and the cabin crew were most apologetic after treifing up my kosher meal from Lewis's. They thought it would be nicer to ignore the instructions, wrestle with the many layers of protective wrapping and plate it up for me. I enjoyed a banana (the first of many) in its place. If they had treifed up the meal on the Dubai / Vienna leg I would have thanked them. I don't recall who the supplier was (big yellow cardboard box) but the cake was like plaster and the chicken tasted as green as it looked. I should have ditched the meal and eaten the box. Instead I had a banana.

Not a lot of people in Dubai airport to make a minyan! The muezzin made a refreshing change from the passenger announcements. The hospitality lounge looked sumptuous and was under scrupulous non-rabbinic supervision. Even the fruit platters shared serving tongs with the cheese and prawn plate. Another banana. I was not really in the mood for the good whisky available (Halal?) and found a tub of Haagen Dasz at the children's counter.

I chose an unobtrusive nook to put on my tefilin (even with a tallit over my head I did not blend in like a local). Mid-prayer, the huge TV screen alongside me switched on to a disparaging news feature on Bibi Netanyahu's comments on Iran and dismantling its nuclear program. "Look folks, these Israelites are brazenly interfering in Arab affairs... And they are even more brazenly praying in our business lounge!"

Arrival in Vienna was smooth. Met by the conference reps and whisked off to the hotel. Given the obligatory lanyard to wear at all times, a pen and the ubiquitous canvas conference bag. Less usual (for me, at any rate) was the Conference iPad mini pre-loaded with the Programme and intranet. It's a loaner, not a freebie - but a sign of the times that you can now zap your questions to the presenters and tweet your reactions rather than have to stick your hand up and walk to the microphone. Looking forward to seeing how it all works.

The kosher restaurant in Vienna is "Simcha's". Open till 11pm on Sunday night I wandered in at almost 10. Still three tables on the go and a good atmosphere. Oh to have such a facility in Sydney. I was happy to have anything but banana and ordered their speciality meaty chummus and a schnitzel. Both good choices. I look forward to dinner tonight when I hope to be more awake, and with company.

The hotel room comes stocked with a minibar, kettles and two books: the New Testament and the writings of Buddha. Some interesting omissions given the forum! Fortunately the Hebrew Scriptures and Koran travel with me on my iPad.

Note to self: next time you travel overseas to a very different time zone, remember to turn the phone off at night. The latest iOS even has 'do not disturb' settings. It's always a pleasure to receive calls from congregants and colleagues. But when they are wide awake, mid afternoon and it's a jetlagged 3am for me, I am at a disadvantage.

There's kosher lunch and dinner arranged but it seems breakfast in the hotel is self-supervised.

And this is how I come to be with an iPhone, iPad, iPad mini at breakfast in the Hilton. Three Apples and a banana!

Type A Housewives

It's jet-lag time. I wake to BBC 24 hour news talking about Type A housewives and frying. I conjure up images of immaculately runny, perfectly round fried eggs achieved through fastidious spouses implanting a spirit level in the pan handle.

My mind defogs and bleary eyes open to see that Taipei housewives are contending with contaminated olive oil.

I reach out to lower the volume and inadvertently switch channel to NCIS in German. They are still seeking "die Wahrheit da draussen". Abby is eine Gote. But the Synchronsprecherinnen just lack the timing and inflection. Did I wake up for this?

Security is tight at the conference. Metal detectors and X-ray machines just like the airport to enter the plenary sessions. I am not the only person with an iPhone, iPad and conference iPad mini after all. Our ID lanyards are barcoded and scanned as we enter sessions. I'm not sure if they are checking that I am entitled to be there or if they are taking attendance and checking that I haven't absconded to spatzier in the Stadtpark or check out the Hofburg palace. Which would you choose, the chance to photograph world cultural treasures or to sit in a conference room for a session on "religious perspectives on the image of the other"?

The conference is predominantly in English but there's an international array of faith leaders and participants. We are given headphones for simultaneous translation. I try to tune into the audio feed for NCIS.

The room is splendid in every respect. Impeccable decor, an elevated dais, a massive widescreen backdrop of rippling water with inset videos of the recent KAICIID year and close ups of the speakers. Saffron robes, vibrant saris, cardinals in black and red, an array of turbans augment the splendor. In my suit and blue suede kippa I'm not nearly as exotic. There are some magnificent beards some trimmed, some wild. Nobody here sports a Movember tash.

There are some grandees of interfaith dialogue. From the Jewish side, Rabbi David Rosen and Rabbi Michael Melchior are veteran A listers. As well as faith leaders and educators, the initiators of some outstanding and visionary projects, there are top diplomats and cultural ambassadors. We trade business cards. I'll spot your Secretary General and raise you a Grand Mufti.

Introductory speeches and a retrospective of the four KAICIID regional events over the last year. Videos and greetings on the screen. A special cross cultural treat as the Vienna Boys Choir appear. They are good. And well do they carry off the South African and Japanese songs in honour of the occasion. It's a little incongruent given they are predominantly Aryan. There is no simultaneous translation of the songs. But we'd all rather hear the Vienna Boys Choir original than the stilted NCIS dubbed version. It is as well that I'm tall. I was able to lift my iPhone high enough to video a clip without having my picture ruined by the sea of uplifted iPhones of participants trying to video a clip.

Some interesting reflections on the image of the other. Biblical narratives of common ancestry; the need to start with a real image of oneself. How do we relate to 'the other' within - our co-religionists who disagree or dissent? Or our own darker side?

We are invited to submit questions using our iPads. The "send" button doesn't clear the screen so people hit it again and again. We all get the message on our iPads to please only send questions once. And then we are running late so only two questions are actually put to the panel. Some

presenters ask and answer their own two questions. Many of the participants have their minds on the coffee break and their own questions. “Is that with milk? With sugar? Which workshop should I go to next?” Everyone is trying to find the selection concealed in the PDF “Hilton Floor Plan Day 1”

Refreshments are welcome. There’s a kosher table! Biscuits and cake. My banana diet is over.

I could cheerfully attend a whole conference on the topics covered by the workshop on New Technologies in Education and Interfaith. The use and abuse of blogs and social media, YouTube, online surveys and polls, fascinates. Some of the website pioneers and policy makers presented. An extensive discussion focuses on hate speech and questions of moderation and censorship. The presenter from Google defends enthusiasts about the advantages of open access. But how do we turn everyone’s home publishing house and video production studio into a tool for the betterment of humanity? Do bloggers and websites really engage and shape opinion or do they confirm opinion, reinforce prejudice and preach to the ether-choir? I have three new Facebook friends by the end of the discussion.

Was I the only person to appreciate the irony that if we wanted a transcript of the technology session we should leave our business cards at the desk? How twentieth century!

Memo to organizers: When there is a keynote panel discussion by their top theologians on “religion and peace” during a buffet lunch also branded “networking lunch” there is a conflict of purpose. Are we supposed to talk, share or listen?

I felt that only two of the presenters had the presence to captivate the diners; Rabbi David Rosen and Swami Agnivesh who is the Swami mentor of 1000 swamis. I disagreed with something that Rabbi Rosen has said about strengthening the profile of religious leaders in resolving the Arab Israel conflict and I emailed him. While the discussion continues I received David’s reply; and indeed my answer. Networking one, panel nil.

The afternoon workshops focused on dialogue techniques facilitated by the Barrett Vales Centre and Preera. We tested a proposition: “Beliefs divide but Values Unite.” The exchange and analysis of values with participants from India, Ethiopia and Bangladesh was stimulating. The tools for self analysis and organizational analysis were useful, though it was felt that some of the strategies were presented with an almost cultish zeal. I do take home some constructive models for managing discussion and effective mediation. Also frustration in the workplace and essential management differences between the corporate and not for profit sectors. And some organizations which are so not-for-profit that they calibrate their annual success by the size of their budget deficits.

Is it helpful to label our values? As with previous sessions a discussion ensued on the merits of names, tags and labels. Do they help us find ourselves and understand ourselves or do they pigeonhole us and limit us in both our eyes and in the eyes of others? One participant took vehement objection to the combining of sense of fun and sense of humour as personal values. I understand the distinction but not the force of his objection. It wasn’t clear he had either.

Should personal growth strive to develop our qualities or balance our weaknesses? Should the communal agenda be to reinforce or redefine our values?

My official personal values analysis from the Barrett Values Centre highlights “making a positive difference in the world” as my defining trait. Perhaps that’s why I wake up to thoughts of “Type A” housewives!

Celebrating Horseplay

I'm in the sumptuous new emirates A380 lounge in Dubai.

A fellow and seasoned traveller complained to me that the seats we had just enjoyed from Vienna should not have been designated business class as they didn't lie quite flat. Having recently travelled to and from England on Virgin sardine class, where if you wriggle in your seat to one side you change video channel, and if you wriggle to the other side, you break off the headphone jack, I was not complaining.

Again no minyan for shacharit in the men's prayer room. Also no siddur. There are prayer mats aplenty with embedded compasses for precise orientation to Mecca. Fortunately I have a Mizrach App on my iPhone; while the room faces Mecca, my body faces Jerusalem. My mind is looking both back at the conference in Vienna and forwards to home and family. There's probably a market for a visual Zen App that helps align the compasses of physical, emotional and spiritual orientation.

While the outside signs are say "prayer room", the signs on the inside say "mosque". It's clear that my shoes should come off and I am grateful that though the ground is holy my socks aren't holey. Also not too rank and clingy. I wore the provided travel socks on the first leg. Indeed I wore them on the feet of both legs.

The kneeling-on-prayer-mat worshippers seem untroubled by the swaying-with-phyllacteries worshipper. For my next trip I might procure a chequered red and white tallit to blend in better with the crowd.

The last day of the conference built on the friendships and discussions of the first. In that regard, very well structured. The opening keynote addresses and panel comprised high level politicians and diplomats and princes of the host Saudi royal family.

There were strong commitments to predictables, such as education and dialogue. There was also a pronounced emphasis on democratic values, gender equality and respect of the other. While applauding the sentiment, the aspiration and the reality many of us perceived, seemed distant.

Many speakers still used the word "tolerate". The idea of "tolerating the other" is long passé in interfaith circles. Toleration suggests a reluctant or pragmatic compromise with something defective. I tolerate the poor reception on our TV but when I say that I tolerate another person it is patronizing and offensive.

There's a dearth of neutral multicultural language. "Accepting" the other is similarly expressive of an imbalanced relationship but often the majority culture is reluctant to "welcome" or "embrace". Inter-cultural diplomacy needs a more expansive lexicon of validation and appreciation. However the constant repetition of "tolerate" becomes intolerable. Alongside my friend from the UN we wince each time, until we smile and eventually need to suppress giggles.

Nonetheless, this language, endorsed by princes, politicians and those charged with the shaping of policy, is a long way from the supremacist, exclusivist and "acceptance on my terms only" positions we hear in the media. We shall see if expressions of desire to change will see tangible implementation. And if the promise of hope can vanquish the insecurity and prejudice born of fear.

The round table discussions that followed were animated. I didn't hear any report of a table that lacked impetus or dynamism. The table I chose was on the conflicts inherent between civil and religious society.

Walid introduced himself as coming from East Jerusalem, and Michal from West Jerusalem, Jeremy, from Sydney, had lived in both. The discussion was frank and engaging, covering anecdotes from the Middle East, America, north and south as well as the Pacific Rim. Acknowledging the magnitude of internal religious tensions experienced by all sides in disputes and the impact that has on the perspectives of citizenship and statehood made for a vibrant exchange. Academics from institutions who were unable to interact formally cautiously explored methodologies of reconciliation. Even the recognition that a latecomer to the table was unable to play an equal part in the discussion spawned analysis of the frustration of the "outsider". Often we identify tensions between a host culture and a significant ethnic minority, totally overlooking and thereby excluding the needs, rights and expectations of immigrants and workers from a third constituency.

It is in this vein that the Judeo-Christian culture of "once upon a time" (and there is more than adequate reason to suggest that it is a mythic construct) has been supplanted by interaction of "the Abrahamic faiths". And why reference to the great wisdom of this latter caused a Hindu leader at the conference to vent his ire.

We didn't resolve the problems of the world, and only time will tell if I have made some real friends rather than Linked-in / Facebook associations. I do know that I have made valuable acquaintances founded upon new respects.

Lunch was a standup buffet. Easier for those who can plate their own food from the serving tables. Harder for those wrestling with prepackaged airline-style kosher fare. I had a fascinating conversation with the Muslim worker at Google as we explored hate-mail, cyber bullying, online racism and racial vilification on the internet in terms of practicalities of jurisdiction and philosophies of censorship.

The closing plenum before the gala evening was a celebration of KAICIID and the two days we had spent in dialogue. Amidst the grandiose backslappings of accomplishment, there were many who were wondering what had been accomplished. We had finished the program but still hadn't fathomed the agenda. We weren't quite sure why some of us had been selected to sit at the table. And yet what we had each brought to the table in terms of ideas and experience had made those tables a rich and enriching encounter.

Though the world hadn't changed and the prospects of some change seem remote, the very fact of the dialogue and the aspirations expressed should not be diminished. They should be applauded and validated.

The invitations to the gala dinner required black tie or traditional costume. Of perhaps 250 men no more than half a dozen wore black tie. Most were in suits. How it was that three of the half dozen black ties were worn by Australians remains a mystery. We punch way above our weight in the most unlikely arenas.

The saris, kaftans and religious robes were magnificent. Also the spiritual bling of holy orders. So far all I had seen of Vienna was the hotel, the dingy walk over the Danube canal (not worth a skip let alone a waltz) and the kosher restaurant. We were taken to the Hofburg Palace to enjoy an equestrian display in the Spanish stables.

I know that I was jetlagged, but there really were dancing horses, stepping diagonally with precision to equine choreography; a pas de deux, waltzes by Strauss and the Radetzky march. Impressive was the ability of the riders to even remember what they had to do let alone manage the synchronized hoof-steps. I have trouble remembering the steps at a bar mitzvah hora!

It was a scene from a movie, a classic setting; Arabian princes in headdress, cardinals in red skull caps, patriarchal robes, an array of turbans and kippot watching liveried jockeys salute 400 years of Hapsburg dressage.

Why would anyone do such a thing to horses? And they, in turn mused, why would one dress Australians in tuxedos?

The reception was elegant. Few speeches, a return of the Vienna Boys Choir. A constant flow of finger-food was brought from the kitchen. Some platters were marked vegan, others halal, a few were marked kosher. The waiters were happy to offload their trays. And to anyone. The kosher felafel and fish skewers were cheerfully taken by hungry guests of a dozen faiths and cultures. A few of us pounced when we could at the only food we could eat. And we smiled with multicultural appreciation when the last kosher spring roll on the platter was gazumped by a Canon or a Confucian.

I am glad that they will have enjoyed their kosher experience. I am now half way between Dubai and Sydney. The meal I was recently served was another one from the yellow cardboard box caterer (read my first post). The hot meal had been opened and plated by the crew. I explained with a smile that that I now couldn't eat it. They apologized profusely.

A sense of déjà Vu? Not quite. We learn from our mistakes.

Remembering my last encounter with the yellow box I appreciated that in sparing me the hot meal they had undoubtedly done me a favour. I had saved and would yet savour the best part of the meal. I pressed the button on my seat that took me from recline to upright and enthusiastically tucked in to the yellow cardboard box. It was truly better than the green chicken main course I had been served on the outward journey.

It's four in the afternoon in Vienna, 7pm in Dubai. In Sydney it's 2am and tomorrow. The plan is pointed towards Sydney. I shall daven maariv facing aft towards Jerusalem. May my prayers rise up to heaven.

Even individually we are pulled in so many different directions that it's sometimes hard to know if we are coming or going. We should cherish those moments when we "synchronise" our compasses, even momentarily, in our majesty and our diversity; we should cherish and celebrate those moments when we all pull together.