

Draft Remarks by Rabbi Arthur Schneier

We live in a remarkable age. Indeed, it so remarkable a period in history that we are overwhelmed by the rush of events. History is happening faster now than ever before. The collapse of communism and the end of the cold war, the handshake of Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, Nelson Mandela's call for an end to economic sanctions against his country -- these and a thousand other great events seem to be happening with the speed of light, and we need time to assimilate them all.

I wonder, as I'm sure you do, why this is the case. What is the reason, I ask myself, that events are moving with such meteoric speed. I believe the answer lies in the television set that is in every home and apartment and hotel room in this country and around the world, bringing instantaneous news and pictures to people everywhere. The speed of these pictures is the speed of light, and we are dazzled by it. The dream of one world has come true, bringing with it hope and expectation -- and also problems and troubles. But we cannot sit back and enjoy history. We must be part of it and shape it. That has been the purpose of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation.

This evening I have a sense of history happening. One of our guests of honor, Patriarch Aleksy II, has had to return to Moscow, to urge his people to avoid bloodshed and the civil war that would follow. Another laureate, Mr. J. P. Bolduc, the president and CEO of W. R. Grace, heads a global company that does business in more than 100 countries. One of our speakers, the Foreign Minister of Russia, was one of the signers of the Israeli-Palestinian agreement that was initialed for our country by Secretary of State Christopher. Another speaker, Strobe Talbott, comes to his post as ambassador-at-large to the new states that once were part of the Soviet Union from Time Magazine, where he was a senior diplomatic correspondent and observer of events. Now he is helping to create them.

Look around you, and you will detect a powerful movement toward peace and reconciliation. This week a newspaper published in the Greek-American community said in an editorial: "If Arab and Jew can renounce the use of violence against each other, what about Greek and Turk?" Shimon Peres, speaking in my synagogue on Sunday, told a group of several thousand that during a recent visit to Ireland he had been asked by several interviewers if he could impart some of the secrets that enabled Israel to find agreement with the PLO.

Yet even as we take heart at the progress toward peace and the growing acceptance of democracy around the world, so too must we concede that terrible national, racial, religious and ethnic conflicts still afflict in this world. Millions still live under oppressive regimes. And powerful emotions among men and nations demand expression.

Religious fundamentalism remains a grave threat to the sense of progress that we all sense.

What, then, is the role of an organization like the Appeal of Conscience Foundation? What part must religious leaders play in confronting the many threats to world stability? In my

judgment, the leaders of faith communities such as those represented in this room tonight -- Orthodox and Catholic, Protestant and Jew and Muslim -- must exercise leadership and demand that there be no shedding of blood, no civil war. A little over a year ago, in Switzerland, my colleagues in the Appeal of Conscience Foundation and I brought together leaders of the Muslim, Orthodox and Catholic religious communities of what had once been Yugoslavia. Together they joined in declaring that war fought in the name of religion is a war against religion.

The sanctity of life -- this is the great principle that our religious leaders must espouse and insist upon in communicating with the men and women and children who look to them for guidance.

This is the reason why our guest of honor this evening, Patriarch Aleksy II, cut short his visit to return home. Today he made a nationwide address, broadcast over television across Russia, pleading with his countrymen to do everything in their power to avoid bloodshed in settling the grave political problem that his country faces. I believe he acted wisely and courageously.

With all the great problems that the world faces today, I for one do not despair. There is a great tide in history, and I believe that tide is moving toward conciliation, toward settlement, toward putting hatred behind us, toward peace and toward freedom. It was only 28 years ago that the Appeal of Conscience. But if one were to measure all of the changes and count all of the advances in human understanding, in tolerance, and in the acceptance of human rights that have occurred during the brief period of our organization's existence, they are enough to take one's breath away. We in the Appeal of Conscience Foundation are proud to have played some part in all of this. The achievements of these years offer hope and encouragement to all of those -- and here I refer to my colleagues in the Foundation -- who have devoted their energies to the great struggle for human rights and human understanding.

To the many friends of the Foundation whose presence tonight denotes their tangible support of our work, I extend our deep appreciation. The great tide of freedom, of peace and reconciliation, of brother extending hand to brother, is growing. One day, I believe and hope and pray, that tide will wash over the whole world, bringing in its train an end to anxiety, and fear, and doubt. Let us work together, you and we, to bring that day closer.

9/28/93

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