

“A Diversity of Religious Opinions”

Keynote Address delivered by
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Good morning. *Boker Tov!* It is a joy to be among old friends, new friends, and – God willing – future friends!

Congratulations to all the scouts receiving religious awards and participating in this morning’s proceedings. We are proud of you! *Mazel Tov!*

I am honored to be here – invited to reflect upon our shared Duty to God and to celebrate the centennial, the 100th anniversary of the 1926 founding of the National Jewish Committee on Scouting.

For 100 years, the National Jewish Committee has urged Jewish youth to embrace Scouting, to grow as Jews and as Americans and as young people of good character. For 100 years, the Committee has produced educational material to foster that growth, has supported packs and troops and leaders and chaplains devoted to that process, and has administered a program of religious awards and activities advancing the cause of Scouting – and Jewish identity. The National Jewish Committee has drawn countless Jewish Scouts closer to Jewish piety and literacy and has provided a context for even the most devout and knowledgeable faithfully to fulfill their duty to God as scouts.

When – in 1926 – Scouting established a Jewish Committee, they performed a stunning, courageous, historic act of national and global moral leadership.

In 1921, Jews had been expelled from much of Central Asia, and massacred in Yafo – near what is now Tel Aviv. In 1924, the National Origins Quota and Immigration Act, fueled by junk science of racial superiority and suppurating xenophobia, largely halted immigration to the U.S. by Jews from Eastern Europe – on the very cusp of the Holocaust. In 1925 Adolf Hitler published *Mein Kampf* – the political manifesto inspiring the Nazi horror. On my lapel today I wear both the insignia of the National Eagle Scout Association and the insignia worn by Jewish Scouts in Lodz, Poland during that dark, doomed period of the ’20s and ’30s.

But, in 1926, the Boy Scouts of America (as we were then known) welcomed a National Jewish Committee to the table. If anyone here today thinks that was not a stunning, courageous, historic act of national and global leadership, I’d agree with you. But then we’d both be wrong! If anyone here today thinks for a moment that welcoming the Jewish Committee was no big deal,

it is only because, for a full century, Scouting has done such a superb job of normalizing religious diversity.

Jewish communal leader Mortimer Schiff knew that when he became the BSA's President in 1931. Ricky Mason – as he assumes the mantle as chairman of Scouting America's Executive Board – knows that now. I suspect he sensed it when he became an Eagle Scout in 1975 at Temple Beth-El in Richmond, Virginia. That was just a few months before I received my Eagle rank at Congregation B'nai Israel in Northampton, Massachusetts (though my troop was chartered to Northampton's First Congregational Church).

During my Eagle Court of Honor, at my Scoutmaster's invitation, my rabbi addressed me directly – charging me to lead a life of personal, spiritual, and moral responsibility. He did so entirely in Hebrew. It was at that moment, dressed in my finest Class-A uniform, that I first realized I had, at least to some modest extent, mastered Hebrew not merely as the language of prayer and prophets, of Psalms and Sages, but as the living language of the world-wide Jewish People and as the living language of the State of Israel. I would be remiss if I did not gratefully acknowledge the fact that Israel declared its independence 78 years ago today, on May 14, 1948. Thanks to my Scoutmaster and my rabbi, my Eagle Court of Honor stands out in my memory as one of my most formative Jewish experiences.

Another early such experience came at my council summer camp, Chesterfield Scout Reservation (of blessed memory!). At lunch one day, an unprecedented event unfolded: no-one had been assigned to offer words of prayer or grace. The camp director – a professional Scouter and devout Baptist – stepped unflinching into the breach. He pulled from his wallet a creased piece of paper he had been saving for just such a crisis, and read from it the Hebrew meal-time blessing *Ha-Motzi* – though I am fairly certain I was the only Jew present. Never before and rarely since have I felt so dramatically that I was in the right place, associating with the right people, part of the right organization: exactly where I belonged.

While these youthful experiences were telling, I truly came to understand the depth and breadth of our shared Duty to God as a Jamboree Chaplain.

At the 1997 National Jamboree (my first), I was assigned to the Western Region... where I was affectionately known as “Chief Rabbi of the Utah Contingent.” (My mother would have been very proud!). Jews were far from a majority in that sector, but we managed to hold worship services daily. I was thrilled. The Sub-Camp 8 quartermaster – a faithful Latter-day Saint – approached me: “Rabbi, how are things going?” I said: “My cup runneth over. Couldn't be better! I have a chapel tent, I have prayerbooks, I have a Torah Scroll, and I have fellow Jews worshipping and learning together!” Then... with no intention to hint or importune, I jokingly, innocently added: “If I had an Ark, it would be just like my synagogue back home!” Sure enough, the next morning that Utahan scouter had built me a beautiful, sturdy, wooden Ark to house the Torah Scroll. That Ark accompanied me to five additional Jamborees. It was used by my congregation when the pandemic forced communal worship outdoors. It has served seminary

students on religious retreat. It remains one of my most prized possessions. Each time it is used, I tell the story of its origins, and how that quartermaster's expansive understanding of Duty to God won his Church a new, life-long friend, and through me many others.

At a later Jamboree, I used that Ark at Sabbath morning services. When the crowd had dispersed and I was straightening up the area, a sizeable group of Catholic Priests (a number of dear friends among them) – entered the tent – where they were to coordinate logistics for the next morning's Sunday Mass with its many thousands of faithful. They turned to me and asked me to offer a blessing on their behalf. I am truly embarrassed to say that – at first – I just assumed they were kidding: engaging in some good-natured ministerial mockery. But it quickly became clear my colleagues were in earnest. So – deeply moved – I offered a few heartfelt (and I hope well-chosen) words of prayer and benediction. Following their collective and sonorous “Amen” – a familiar voice from among them called out: “Not bad, Prouser. Now do it in Latin!” The entire assemblage broke into laughter. Now they were mocking me. Never one to be caught unprepared, I responded by quoting Marcus Tullius Cicero – the Roman senator and farmer of the First Century BCE. I'm not sure whether it was farming or politics he had in mind when he said, “*Quid de utilitate loquar stercorandi*” – “What useful thing can I say about the spreading of... manure!”

Years later, I conducted Jamboree Sabbath Eve services on a stormy Friday night, perhaps two miles from my campsite. Methodist Chaplain Jason Fry knew that, in observance of the Sabbath, I would neither use a flashlight nor carry an umbrella nor travel by vehicle on the way back to my tent. I suspect he also had justifiable doubts about my sense of direction. So, he attended my Shabbat service and walked me home through a driving rain, amid violent thunder and lightning. As the storm raged, we found ourselves on that raised walkway overlooking the Summit's main swimming area. We realized that standing under his umbrella, its metal framework held aloft, on a raised platform, surrounded by water, during an electric storm... was a plan perhaps not perfectly conceived!! We briefly discussed the bad press that would ensue should two chaplains be struck by lightning walking home from Sabbath worship. Jason ditched the umbrella.... and, a bit soggy, we picked up the pace considerably.

Finally, it was my privilege to serve as chaplain at the 2015 World Jamboree in Japan. If I am not mistaken, all but one American chaplain stayed at a 5-star hotel not far from the Jamboree site... and (*domo arigato!*) commuted via air-conditioned chartered bus. My assigned room-mate was Muslim chaplain Sayed Naqvi – by then already an old friend. [I know: it sounds like a joke – “So a rabbi and a Muslim walk into a Japanese hotel....” but this story is true in every detail: no “stercorandi”!]

Chaplains were given days off in rotation, so I and the one chaplain staying in camp – Archpriest Eric Tosi of the Orthodox Church of America – planned to travel together to Hiroshima. Father Tosi stayed over in our hotel room and slept on the floor to facilitate an early departure the next morning. Morning came, and Father Eric courteously asked how I had slept. I had had a good, refreshing night's sleep. “Sayed, how did you sleep?” “Oh! Not at all well,”

Sayed told Father Eric. “My bed was shaking the whole night,” he explained. “I think there might have been (and here I paraphrase) a malevolent supernatural force in the room,” he said. So, Sayed told us, he got up during the night, and read aloud verses from the Holy Koran – invoking divine protection upon all of us in the room.

Father Eric protested: “Sayed! There was no ‘malevolent supernatural force!’ You were snoring and I couldn’t sleep, so I reached over, grabbed the leg of your bed and gave it a good shake. You rolled over and stopped snoring. When you started up again, I reached over, grabbed the leg of the bed and shook it. You rolled over and....” This apparently went on for hours.

Sayed looked genuinely puzzled. He thought about it for a long moment. Then he announced: [and I quote!] “I don’t snore. It must have been Joe!!”

It was precisely the response I would have expected. It was precisely the response I would have expected from my own brother!! “Wasn’t me. Must have been Joe!!”

Sayed, my brother, when 3000 years ago the Psalmist wrote *Hinei ma tov u-ma na'im* – “How good it is for brothers to dwell together in peace” – he was talking about you and me. He was talking about all of us in this room celebrating our various faiths and re-affirming the principled, expansive understanding of Duty to God which we share as Scouts.

Thomas Paine led the way 250 years ago – in 1776 – when he wrote, “It is the will of the Almighty that there should be a diversity of religious opinions among us.”

Scouting’s original 1911 Handbook continued Paine’s visionary work when it insisted on faith in the life of the scout, and stated the principled non-sectarianism of the American scouting movement, in no uncertain terms. It read:

“No (scout) can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing (an) obligation to God... If he be a Catholic scout, the Catholic Church... is the best channel for his training. If he be a Hebrew... then the synagogue will train him in the faith of his fathers. If he be a Protestant, no matter to what denomination of Protestantism he may belong, the church of which he is an adherent... should be the proper organization to give him an education in the things that pertain to his allegiance to God.”

And so, in 1926, the National Jewish Committee on Scouting was welcomed to the table. Stunning. Courageous. Historic. Moral. Leadership.

With gratitude for what Scouting did 100 years ago, and in the express spirit of my fellow chaplains – with whom and from whom I have learned so very much – let us pray:

May we continue to build together, even when we are tempted to complacency and begin to think we have already accomplished all that is required.

May we continue to be a blessing to each other, listening closely to each other, translating our respective creeds into meaningful action, and sharing sacred space and our sacred mission with good humor.

May we continue to walk together, even when the times are dark and the elements are uncongenial or threatening.

And *Hinei ma tov u-ma na'im shevet achim gam yachad* – May we continue to dwell together in peace, protecting and looking out for each other like the true brothers and sisters we are meant to be – even when we are thoroughly shaken by divergent perspectives, contentious spirits, and divisive current events and conflicts.

May God speed His angels – many of whom are already in this room – to watch over the young people entrusted to our care.

My fellow Scouts and Scouters, may it be “the Will of the Almighty that there be a diversity of religious opinions among us” and may we continue to take a principled, courageous stand against bigotries – old and new – for another 100 years at the very least. Perhaps – with God’s help – another 250.

She-nelech mi-chayil el chayil – May we go from strength to strength. Thank you all so very much. God bless you.