FETHULLAH GÜLEN'S "JEWISH DIALOGUE"

Fethullah Gülen is a moderate Turkish Muslim scholar, a prolific writer, philosopher, and leader of a self-named movement. His critics accuse him of undermining Turkish secular values, while his followers claim that he is a moderate religious scholar that is a victim of baseless and recurring attacks. Gülen and his Movement promote interfaith dialogue. The purpose of this essay is to examine Gülen's relations with the Jewish community inside and outside Turkey, and analyze whether this dialogue is used as a tool to empower the Movement or to disseminate Islam, as Gülen's critics claim, or whether it is based on a genuine desire to appeal to the Jewish community and carry out a real dialogue.

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Gülen's Movement



ethullah Gülen's movement, in its current format, began to take shape in the mid-1970s. Up until that point, Fethullah Gülen, the hub of the Movement, was a religious scholar in the service of the Turkish government, who roamed from place to place to lecture and preach in mosques. Gülen was the disciple of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877-

1960), a scholar and intellectual, founder of the Nur(cu) Movement and author of the six-thousand-page commentary of the Koran, Risale-i Nur.¹

Following Nursi's death, and in the absence of an undisputed heir, his followers split into sub communities in the 1960s and 1970s, on political-religious grounds. Gülen's movement, centered around Gülen as the leader, formed as an independent community in the early 1970's. Although these were tumultuous years between the second coup d'état (1971) and the third coup d'état (1980), his community, and later Gülen's movement came together almost irrespective of concurrent events, excluding the influence of the social atmosphere in Turkey during that time of the movement.

This decade, which represented the bitter struggle between the "Marxist Left" and the "National Right" in Turkish history, with dozens of casualties resulting from the struggle between both ends of the political spectrum, encouraged Gülen's Movement to employ a non-radical stance. In response to these incidents, the Movement hoped to create an alternative social path that would focus on ethical belief and values and not on radical political ideology.

The historical events of those years influenced the Movement in the long-term as well. Gülen and his followers witnessed the destructive potential of political confrontation, and therefore the movement founded the Abant Platform [Abant Bildirisi] in the 1990s, which, for the first time in Turkish history, included intellectuals with various and conflicting political perspectives that helped them reach a consensus on important issues on Turkey's agenda.

The history of the movement can be briefly defined as following: The establishment and formation period shall be set from 1966 to the coup d'état in 1980. After this coup, religious foundations were strengthened in Turkey under the auspices of the military junta, in order to stabilize an opposing factor to the radical Left. The years 1980-1994 defines the period during which the emphasis was placed on education and building schools on a national and international level.

¹ For more on Nursi, refer to his official biography: Necmettin Şahiner (ed.), *Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Hakkında Aydınlar Konuşuyor* [Intellectuals are Talking about Said Nursi and Nurculuk] (İstanbul: Yeni Asya, 1977); Şükran Vahide, The Author of the Risale-i Nur: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (İstanbul: Sözler Publication, 1992).

Between 1994 and 1999, the movement is characterized by its debut to the public arena and introducing the issue of interreligious dialogue. This stage begins with the establishment of the Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfi The Journalist and Writers Foundation] and includes extensive exposure to the media, and meetings with politicians, artists, religious scholars and leaders. The last stage shall be set from 1999 to date. During this period, the movement is forced to defend itself against extensive assault of the media and public opinion in Turkey, and to cope with their leader in exile. The "anti-Gülen" campaign began in 1999, which started when Gülen was secretly filmed by an intelligence agent, who apparently infiltrated Gülen's closest followers. Gülen then, was recorded saying that the Turkish regime must be replaced, by a slow process of infiltrating the key positions in government and the Turkish administration.² This recording was broadcasted on 18 June 1999 on channel ATV and other channels.3 It was apparently an intelligence agent that infiltrated the circle, since the photos that were covertly taken were of good quality, and the conversation was one that Gülen had with his closest circle.4 Gülen denies the allegations against him and claims that a "copy-paste" counterfeit attempt was made in order to incriminate him.

All this somewhat minimized the Gülen Movement's activities inside Turkey, until the 21st century.

After the 1997 coup, the Movement lost its public legitimacy, and even more so following the media attacks in 1999 following the videotapes affair. The community's center of gravity moved to the United States and in recent years, Europe and South America are being perceived as popular arenas for its activities. In this context, the Movement began establishing institutions in Gülen's name and conducting international academic conferences associated with Gülen and his philosophy, at a higher frequency worldwide. It can be said that academic activity is a relatively new characteristic of the movement and it replaces the emphasis that had been placed on religious activity.⁵

This stage is also characterized by the Movement's attempts to win international legitimacy as a peace and "dialogue" movement, by presenting Gülen as a global leader and intellectual. All this was reinforced by the events of September 11, when the global need arose for historical examples of peaceful coexistence. In an interview with Gülen, he states that the Ottoman attempt captivated the world and

² "Revelations Hurt Gülen, Prosecutor Demands Punishment", *Turkish Daily News*, 21 June1999.

³ Every attempt to obtain these tapes by contacting the various television networks in Turkey by telephone were futile, but some of them have been uploaded to the Internet, or distributed by email, and can be found at the following URLs: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ni3Z3qZ7Z4; www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tbnGnzdmgU; www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRAyGkEl9S0, accessed on: 22 May 2008

⁴ Conversation with a Turkish diplomat, 17 June 2004.

⁵ For different periodization, see: Hakan Yavuz, Islamic Political Identity in Turkey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 181-185

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the best example of love, tolerance and dialogue can be found in the Gülen movement. In a discussion that I had with Cemal Uşşak, chairperson of the Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı, he dissociated himself from referring to Gülen as a Turkish nationalist, thereby reinforcing the "international" landscape of Gülen's leadership, which is one of the characteristics of the late 1990's period. Uşşak claimed that Gülen's Movement traversed Turkey's borders long ago to become an international movement whose activities are mostly conducted outside of Turkey.

Tolerance and Jews

According to Gülen, the idea of tolerance does not aim to confine itself in a narrow space. On the contrary, you must begin with the immediate environment, and then spread to more distant circles. Gülen sees great importance in disseminating tolerance because of the fact that the world is a global village, and it is imperative to lay the foundation for communication without making distinctions between Christians, Jews, Atheists or Buddhists. However, you must still begin with your immediate circle, since without it you cannot move onward and outward. In this way, you can radiate tolerance from your immediate environment to more distant ones.⁸ Gülen remarks that tolerance is occasionally interpreted superficially by specific individuals, since they are attempting to change those around them under the guise of dialogue, but the idea that stands behind tolerance is to accept everyone as is, regardless of faith or beliefs. Beyond this, tolerance also includes the ability to connect with each other, to make a connection, to talk and communicate.⁹

In fact, the religious tolerance that Gülen represents is not new to the Turks. It is based on the tolerance of the Ottoman regime throughout six hundred years and spanning three continents. Gülen gives numerous examples from the Ottoman history, the one to which he repeatedly refers is Fatih Sultan Mehmet, who unraveled the Greek and Armenian patriarchy in Istanbul and gave its leaders religious autonomy and authority. On the 31st anniversary of the establishment of the Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı, in an event that took place in İstanbul, Jak Kamhi, a Jewish Turkish industrialist said that Gülen has not really reinvented anything with his interreligious activity, since the Turks exhibited love and respect for all nations for hundreds of years. Moreover, Kamhi said that were it not for this tolerance of the Turks, he himself would not exist: "Gülen manifests a long-standing tradition

⁶ E-mail interview with Gülen, 14 November 2006.

⁷ Istanbul, 23 January 2008. For more information on the movement's new international landscape, see: Ali Bulaç, *Din, Kent ve Cemaat & Fethullah Gülen Örneği[Religion, City and the Community:The Example of Fethullah Gülen]* (İstanbul: Ufuk Kitapları, 2008).

⁸ Fethullah Gülen, İnsanın Özündeki SevgifLove in Human Essence] (İstanbul: Da Yayıncılık, 2003), p. 165.

⁹ İsmail Ünal, Fethullah Gülen'le Amerika'da Bir Ay [A Month in America with Fethullah Gülen] (İstanbul: Işık Yayınları, 2001), p. 89.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 78.

of tolerance, which helps familiarize the world with the beautiful sides of Turkish society". 11

Because of this approach, of perceiving dialogue as both a religious and a moral-national-social obligation, Gülen met with countless leaders and key people from the three religions during the 1990s. He met with Jewish leaders, both secular and religious, inside and outside of Turkey, in order to promote dialogue between Judaism and Islam. Gülen was the first one to initiate interreligious meetings in Turkey, as testified by Yusuf Sağ Monsignor, patriarchal representative of the Catholic-

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Assyrian church in Turkey. Yusuf Sağ was one of the first religious leaders to meet Gülen in Turkey, who said that the initiative for the interreligious meetings was made by Gülen. The first to join was the Greek patriarch, followed by the Armenian patriarch, Rabbi İshak Haleva, Yusuf Sağ, and finally the Mufti of Istanbul. Sağ, in a personal interview, said that he himself attended at least 14 of Gülen's Ramadan meals in 2006, under the umbrella of interreligious activity. Sağ recounts that Gülen was the first to talk about interreligion at a time when no one even thought or spoke about dialogue. Sağ mentions that numerous others followed Gülen's example. Due to all the aforementioned, it is extremely important to examine the Gülen initiative associated with the interreligious meetings and to pay special attention to the interests vested in it. The purpose of each these meetings should be ascertained.

The first of a series of meetings with Jewish leaders was with representatives from the Anti-Defamation League, whom Gülen met with at least twice, once in the United States and once in Turkey. The first meeting between Gülen and the League took place in New Jersey, attended by the President of the Anti-Defamation League, Abraham Foxman, and Kenneth Jacobson, who was then National Deputy Director of the League, as well as the Director of Foreign Affairs, and an additional representative. The League representatives arrived at Gülen's house during his convalescent period in 1997. This was a specific League meeting. Jacobson said the following about the first meeting:

¹¹ Ali Ünal, M. Fethullah Gülen Bir Portre Denemesi [An Attempt to Portrait M. Fettullah Gülen] (İstanbul: Nil Yayınları, 2004), p. 359.

¹² Interview with Yusuf Saŭ. İstanbul. 18 December 2006.

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"Circa the 1990s, we worked intensively to promote Turkish understanding in America, as part of the effort to strengthen Turkish-U.S. relations, so that Turkey would be able to continue its relations with Israel... We were known to be involved with Turkev... And then some people contacted us... and said that they had information about a very important and moderate individual... that takes Islam in the right direction... a very interesting phenomenon indeed... We decided to meet with him [Fethullah Gülen]... and this meeting took place with Abe Foxman, myself and another colleague. The meeting lasted approx. one hour... Gülen talked about his moderation regarding Islam, the Jews, Israel, and expressed reasonable and non-extremist views... It was a very good meeting, very friendly... A group of his followers came to see us after our meeting with him and then asked if we could introduce Gülen to people in Washington... but I don't recall which specific meeting came after. I think we offered our help in introducing him to others, which I think happened/didn't happen."13

Kenneth Jacobson recounts that the second meeting took place in Istanbul during a visit by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, on their way back to the United States from Israel. Despite the opposition of the military and government, as well as people in the Turkish Jewish community, to hold a second meeting with Gülen, Jacobson decided to meet with him and two others, one of who was then the Chairman of the Conference of Presidents, Leon Levy.¹⁴ The first meeting took place at Gülen's initiative, via mediators. These mediators came to the League representatives following the League's involvement in several conferences, including the main conference to commemorate 500 years of Jewish life in Turkey, which took place in the United States. The League also organized a gala dinner in New York for then Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz. In a ceremony conducted on 18 December 1997, the League awarded the tolerance prize to Yılmaz for his efforts in promoting democracy, and for his religious pluralism and tolerance. During that same period, the League worked intensively to tighten U.S.-Turkey-Israel relations, which seems to have spurred the movement's desire to meet with the League.

Jacobson said the following about the second meeting, which took place in Istanbul in 1998:

¹³ Telephone interview with Kenneth Jacobson, 19 January 2005.

¹⁴ This meeting might have been the source of the error that appeared in various movement publications, according to which Leon Levy was the former Chairman of the Anti-Defamation League, although Levy never occupied any position in the League. This error can be found, for example, in: Ali Ünal and Alphonse Williams, *Fethullah Gülen: Advocate of Dialogue* (Fairfax: The Fountain, 2000), p. 287.

"I remember it like it was yesterday. There were all sorts of television cameras there, TV networks, and lots and lots of cameras, as if it were a high profile meeting. We met, and it was another pleasant encounter. We were given gifts... again Gülen spoke in terms of moderation. He presented himself as someone that cares about moderation in Turkey and cares about a moderate Islam and as someone interested in good relations with Israel and the Jews... afterwards there was a follow-up meeting with his assistants in New York...as far as I know, he is not in touch with us... The meeting lasted half an hour and did not go into as much depth as the first, since we had to rush and join the rest of the group, which was waiting for the return flight to the U.S." 15

It is possible then, that Gülen's goal was to reach key people in Washington via the League members. However, Jacobson recounts that the essence of the meetings with Gülen was mostly introductory and courteous, and for the most part, no particularly significant decisions were made during these meetings.

Another meeting between Gülen and a Jewish leader was held in 1997 with Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, who served as the Chief Sephardic Rabbi in Israel between 1993 and 2003. This meeting took place because of Zali De Toledo's initiative, the cultural attaché in the Israeli consulate in Istanbul. The invitation was accepted. Prior to the visit, there was a request from Abdülkerim Balcı, who was then the correspondent of the newspaper Zaman in Israel, to bring Gülen and Rabbi Bakshi-Doron together, which did not happen. The then The President of Religious Affairs, Mehmet Nuri Yılmaz, initially opposed meeting, claiming that Gülen did not have any official title, but he eventually agreed. The Israeli Foreign Ministry thought that a meeting with Gülen could help quell the hatred and resistance to Israel and/or Jews, and therefore they authorized it, but Bakshi-Doron had a different interest – he wanted to ask for help in freeing Iranian Jews that were imprisoned for alleged espionage. Back then, Zali De Toledo says the following about the meeting:

"At first, I translated for Rabbi Bakshi-Doron and Fethullah Gülen, in front of approximately 15 television microphones. The meeting took

¹⁵ This meeting might have been the source of the error that appeared in various movement publications, according to which Leon Levy was the former Chairman of the Anti-Defamation League, although Levy never occupied any position in the League. This error can be found, for example, in: Ali Ünal and Alphonse Williams, Fethullah Gülen: Advocate of Dialogue (Fairfax: The Fountain, 2000), p. 287.
¹⁶ In an interview with Zali De Toledo, held on 4 March 2004, Zali said that she contacted the CEO of the Administration for Religious Affairs, Mehmet Nuri Yılmaz, and urged him to extend an official invitation to the Chief Sephardic Rabbi, to come to Turkey. This was the first time that a Chief Rabbi came on an official visit from Israel to Turkey, and the second visit of a Chief Rabbi in a Muslim country.

¹⁷ During the meeting, Rabbi Bakshi Doron congratulated Gülen on sending his delegate to Israel, and Gülen responded by saying that Balcı was not his delegate, but his "disciple".

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place in Gülen's building in Istanbul. When Gülen entered, I extended my hand to him, a gesture that he did not return, but in order for my hand not to remain outstretched, one of his assistants immediately shook it. The Rabbi and Gülen quoted excerpts from the Torah and the Koran, and I translated. Afterwards, we adjourned to a quiet meeting, with the attendance of Rabbi Bakshi-Doron, Fethullah Gülen, his assistants, Rabbi Bakshi-Doron's assistant Rafi Dayan, Eli Shaked, who was then the General Consul, and me. Rabbi Bakshi-Doron requested assistance for Iranian Jews, saying that there are widows and 'agunot' (literally 'anchored or chained', a Halachic term for a Jewish woman who is "chained" to her marriage). left there and that there is no Rabbi there to help them. Gülen said that he had no ties with Iran and that's where the matter ended... Gülen was interested in opening one of his schools in Israel and that was the reason for his meeting with the Chief Rabbi."¹⁸

"Gülen's true purpose in strengthening ties with the Jewish community and Israeli representatives in Turkey might have been to try to create world peace and harmony, with Israel playing a key and significant role in giving a global example of peace."

During this meeting, Gülen told Bakshi-Doron that it was imperative to discuss issues pertaining to all the religions and that it was their duty as religious leaders to pass this message on. In response, Rabbi Bakshi-Doron said that he appreciated Gülen's efforts to create interreligious dialogue and world peace. He also added that they must, as religious leaders, visibly work towards peace. He added, that he had agreed to meet Gülen because he was an important personality in the Muslim world and it was important that such a message come from him. Bakshi-Doron apparently agreed to opening a Muslim school in Israel in principle, but the idea was rejected at the government level. 19 According to a senior personality that

worked with Rabbi Bakshi-Doron, Gülen requested to establish a Muslim school in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. According to this testimony, Gülen wanted to visit Israel, but his visit was not authorized by the Israeli Foreign Ministry. The source testified that Gülen left a positive impression on the Rabbi and that the two

¹⁸ Interview with Zali De Toledo, Ramat Hasharon, 4 March 2004.

¹⁹ Ünal and Williams, Fethullah Gülen: Advocate of Dialogue, pp. 276-277.

exchanged greeting cards for the holidays, at least until Gülen left for the United States.²⁰ In other words, there was a mostly mutual interest at the basis of these meetings, but the meeting was also utilized to strengthen interpersonal ties.

On the other hand, Gülen's true purpose in strengthening ties with the Jewish community and Israeli representatives in Turkey might have been to try to create world peace and harmony, with Israel playing a key and significant role in giving a global example of peace. If Israel, renowned in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it has been embroiled in for years, expresses a message of peace, then it will influence the international arena and maybe even propagate to other conflict zones. Thus, Israel could serve as an example and symbol of successful dialogue. Moreover, there is an attempt to initiate dialogue with "post-Ottoman" zones and from here the path to dialogue with Israel as a former Ottoman territory. It should be noted that the people in Gülen's Movement, via the Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı, organized a communications conference in Istanbul at the end of May 2008, to which Turkish and Israeli journalists were invited, with the purpose of creating a more in-depth acquaintance between them. 22

Several meeting were also held in Turkey between Gülen and Turkey's former Chief Rabbi, David Asseo, with Rabbi İshak Haleva, who was then Asseo's deputy, also in attendance. In a personal interview, Haleva stresses Gülen's assistance to the community. He mentions Gülen's mediation between the community and elements in the media that published inflammatory content against the Jews. In Haleva's opinion, Gülen did a tremendous service, not only to Jews, but to Turkey as a whole. According to Haleva, minorities in Turkey were regarded with suspicion due to the process of nationality that the Republic underwent, and therefore the closeness that Gülen created between the Muslims, Christians and Jews in Turkey, was of ultimate importance. When you speak, he said, the negative impression dissipates:

If I do not hate someone, then I learn to love him over time. So perhaps Gülen's activity will not have an immediate impact on the next generation, but it will definitely have one on future generations... and this is how they will learn to love him. Personally, I very much admire Gülen.²⁴

²⁰ A source from the Chief Rabbi's office that wishes to remain anonymous, 8 January 2004.

²¹ Personal interview outside of Israel with a diplomatic source that wishes to remain anonymous, 25 January 2008.

²² A source associated with the movement that wishes to remain anonymous, 28 January 2008.

²³ Interview with Rabbi İshak Haleva, Tel Aviv, 25 May 2005.

²⁴ Ihid

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Gülen and Haleva maintained their relationship and they exchanged greeting cards and gifts. Haleva recounts that until Gülen's interreligious activity, every ethnic group acted separately, whereas now there is cooperation between all the religious minorities. Rabbi İshak Haleva also stated that throughout history, the religions always constituted a cause for disputes and conflicts, and therefore religions are those that currently need to act towards promoting peace. Haleva claims that he believes in what Gülen is doing, because "thoughts only God is privy to, but actions are for all to see". Moreover, he tends to believe him and not necessarily because his numerous followers are intellectuals, scientists and writers, influential and introspective people that cannot be easily influenced or brainwashed.²⁵ In other words, the Jews use Gülen for their own community interests, and therefore it was apparently not for the sake of closeness alone.

Another close friend of Gülen's from the Jewish community is Ishak Alaton, a business tycoon that owns Alarko, among other things. He met with Gülen several times in Istanbul and they regularly keep in touch on the telephone. Alaton helps Gülen, thanks to his plentiful contacts worldwide. According to him, the first meeting with Gülen was mediated by his business partner, Üzeyir Garih, and the nature of the meeting did not cover business matters.²⁶ In any case, Gülen turned to Alaton asking for help, because Alarko built the airport in Askabat, Turkmenistan. where Gülen wanted to establish a school. The second instance where the two helped Gülen was in Moscow in the early 1990s. The third instance was Cape Town, a request that stemmed from Alaton being an honorary General Consul of South Africa.²⁷ The relationship with Alaton benefited Gülen from another angle: he proved that Gülen was not connected with the American government. In a personal interview with Alaton, he recounted that in October 2006, Gülen had a bureaucratic problem with the Immigration Office in the U.S. regarding extending his stay there. Gülen's secretary in Turkey, Ahmet Kara, contacted Alaton for help. Alaton recounted that not only did Kara contact him, but also Dumanlı, the editor of Zaman at the time, and "everyone was in a panic", in his words.²⁸ Alaton helped extend Gülen's visa in the U.S. through the former U.S. Ambassador in Turkey, Morton Abramowitz. This incident might cast doubt on the rumors that Gülen was linked to the CIA, he did not have special connections in the United States seeing that he needed the urgent help of Alaton, a businessman, when Gülen was in official trouble with the American authorities. Alaton mentions that Gülen does not have a good grasp of English, and that living in the U.S. is like prison for him, so

²⁵ Interview with Rabbi İshak Haleva, Tel Aviv, 25 May 2005.

²⁶ Garih was stabbed to death on 24 August 2001 while watching over some grave at the Eyüp Cemetery in Istanbul. The homicide remains unsolved to date.

²⁷ Interview with Ishak Alaton, Istanbul, 25 December 2006.

²⁸ Ihid

in actuality, his stay there was imposed on him in a medical context, and was not the outcome of a covert connection with American intelligence.²⁹

In response to the suspicious attitude towards Gülen, Jak Kamhi says that Turkey is very mistaken regarding its apprehensive attitude towards Gülen, since he believes Gülen's movement has no intention of imposing religion on Turkey. He adds that Gülen is a sick man that can die at any time, which, if it happens, will be a calamity for Turkey since the masses will regard him as a martyr. A martyr is someone that has sacrificed his or her life for hardship, and the pressure from Turkish society can definitely cause this. He claims: "You can always kill someone, but the martyr will never die." 30

Gülen apparently slandered the Jews in the 1970s. Rabbi Haleva testified that he saw a televized speech that Gülen gave against Jews, in one of the mosques, but Haleva responds by claiming that he was not affected by the speech since he is accustomed to hearing defamation against the Jews. Apparently, these things even appeared in print, on tapes and in books, which contained various declarations Gülen made against the Jews. Zali De Toledo stated that Gülen's first books, which contained numerous passages against the Jews, were removed from the stores and can no longer be found.31 Attempts to find Gülen's books from that period were futile. Gülen denies it, saying that prior to the 1990s, he wrote and preached against those that disguised political aims with religion, but he was never involved in an active or open conflict with any Jewish group, and he is interested in pursuing a line of tolerance towards Jews. He even claims to be the first Muslim in Turkey that initiated dialogue with the Jewish community and its leaders in Turkey in the 1990s. 32 Haleva explains this by saving that during that period (seemingly in the late 1970's), Gülen was familiar with the Jews through books alone. Another possible reason, in his opinion, is the desire to win wide and sweeping public approval, and it was common knowledge that among the extremist Muslims in Turkey, as Haleva said, anyone that exhibits anti-Jewish sentiments wins greater acclaim. In other words, in order to be accepted and create legitimacy among the religious community, Gülen had to initially express populist opinions, which he estranged himself from later on, after already gaining sufficient legitimacy. On the other hand, it is possible, as Haleva proposed, that Gülen simply underwent a true spiritual transformation when he got closer to the world outside of Islam. Accord-

²⁹ Ibid. For more information about Abramowitz and Gülen's relationship, also see: Yasemin Çongar, "Abramowitz'e Yardım Sözü" [A Promise for Help to Abromowitz], *Milliyet*, 31 August 1997.

³⁰ Mustafa Armağan and Ali Ünal (eds.), Medya Aynasında Fethullah Gülen, Kozadan Kelebeğe [Fethullah Gülen: Reflections on the Media], (İstanbul: Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı Yayınları, 1999), p. 92.

³¹ An interview with Zali De Toledo, Ramat Hasharon, 4 March 2004. Attempts to obtain these books through various libraries and different sources were futile.

³² E-mail interview with Gülen, 14 November 2006.

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ing to Haleva, the change that Gülen underwent was so great that he began to speak very positively about the Jews:

He [Gülen] invited us several times and at various opportunities, we talked a lot... and at *iftar* we spoke a lot... the hospitality was very nice. The meetings were held in a hotel and once also at one of Gülen's schools on the Asian side. We were very well received... when the press targeted Jews, which we were already used to, Gülen would mediate somehow in order that anti-Jewish sentiments would not be published... he also made contact with key Muslim leaders for this purpose.³³

Reverend Elizabeth Brown, affiliated with the Unitarian Church, conjectured: In her opinion, the criticism towards Gülen was actually caused by the "soft coup" of 1997. She says that since then, the regime in Turkey tended to be intolerant of anyone religious and Gülen fits into this definition. Brown also notes that she is not surprised that Gülen has dissenters, "like Jesus", she adds. Her testimony that you do not need to see Gülen in order to be impressed by him suffices to get a positive impression of him and his people. The work that Gülen's people do, says Brown, "brings me to tears". 34 She then went on to say that "religion changes people" and Gülen may have simply undergone a religious or spiritual transformation.

Discussion with numerous Turkish Jews paints a picture of apprehension and fear towards anything associated with the Gülen Movement, even if people are only familiar with him from the media. It is possible that Jewish society is influenced by the general society and may be apprehensive since any religious issue tends to be met with even greater reluctance or repugnance among the Jews than among the Turks. Notwithstanding, secular society in Turkey, as Rıfat Bali attested, does not only oppose Gülen Movement, but any community, movement, or religious organization that jeopardizes Kemalism and secularism in Turkey, with its worldview. 35 Subsequently, the opposition to Gülen is not actually due to the Movement's components, characteristics, or principles of its belief, but due to a general fear of religious domination over Turkey. The fear and misgivings from Gülen Movement are applicable to any movement, organization or party that deals with religion. Perhaps the fear of Gülen and his Movement may be greater than of other movements, because of its popularity. In other words, the more popular the Movement becomes, the greater the reservations about it become. Therefore, fear of Gülen and his movement is actually the fear of anything connected, even

³³ An interview with Rabbi İshak Haleva, Tel Aviv, 25 May 2005.

³⁴ A telephone interview with Reverend Elizabeth Brown, 26 October 2005.

³⁵ An interview with Rıfat Bali, Istanbul, 25 December 2006.

remotely, to religion, and therefore opposition to Gülen's movement may not be because of what it stands for as a specific movement, but rather due to it being a religious movement.

A possible explanation to the contradiction between Gülen's "old" utterances and his declarations regarding interreligious dialogue is that there is a tendency in Turkish society to "hunt" a successful person and undermine his status and success, and therefore, even though Gülen changed his ways and renounced the opinions that he allegedly expressed in the past, segments of the Turkish society continue to see him as a hypocrite and liar. Rabbi İshak Haleva added that not every statement must be taken seriously or treated as absolute truth, since some-

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times a person says things in anger, and he must not be judged for this.³⁶ Even the Israeli Foreign Ministry changed its mind about Gülen throughout the years: from extreme suspicion in the early 1990s to indifference and hesitation, to cooperation with the Movement's people, including the participation of the Israeli diplomat at an academic conference that took place at the Movement's Fatih University, in 2008.³⁷

Gülen also keeps in touch with all his members and people that participated in interreligious activity, even if he purportedly does not have a vested interest. Therefore, prior to religious events and holidays, Gülen tends to send gifts and greeting cards, a fact that has been mentioned with much admiration by anyone that was interviewed for this essay. Reverend Elizabeth Brown, for example, participated in a 12-day trip to Turkey organized by the Movement's Interreligious Dialogue Center. Brown admits that she never met Gülen, but the generosity of his people made a deep impression on her.³⁸

³⁶ An interview with Rabbi İshak Haleva, Tel Aviv, 25 May 2005.

³⁷ Fatih University was founded in 1996 by supporters of the Movement.

³⁸ A telephone interview with Reverend Elizabeth Brown, 26 October 2005.

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Conclusions

This paper has illustrated that dialogue became a milestone in the Movement's platform, mainly in the 1990s. Dialogue most certainly served the Movement in its debut to the public arena because it was a fresh and clever idea that won great acclaim and resulted in meetings that were a precedent in Turkey, and attracted a great deal of media attention. All this helped to empower the Movement. Moreover, every meeting included the various interests of its participants. However, it is difficult to determine with certainty what purposes these meetings served. Perhaps when Gülen saw that he was not "redeeming" and the meetings did not meet his expectations, he turned these meeting into ones that deal with "interreligious tolerance". We could presume that there is an imbedded economic interest in some of these meetings, but then, it is at the same time difficult to envision that Gülen, whose Movement's worth is estimated at billions of dollars, requires favors from the Jewish community in Turkey or from the State of Israel. Hence, it is difficult to imagine that there is a real Gülen interest in these meetings. It is difficult to believe that Gülen also had an economic interest in his meetings or in giving gifts, because he did not have any financial hardships. The aggregate wealth of the Movement's foundations is 25 billion dollars. 39 Regarding Gülen's economic capabilities, one of Reed's acquaintances testified that Gülen is the richest person in Turkey and perhaps the richest person in the world. Although he does not own any assets other than his books, he can have whatever his heart desires. 40 Subsequently, Gülen does not have any monetary or financial need in his ties with religious leaders. Rabbi Ishak Haleva testified that at the beginning of his acquaintance with Gülen. he suspected that Gülen's motive was to squeeze money from the Jewish community and did not trust him, until he was told that Gülen has access to so much money, "that he can buy everyone",41

In light of the aforesaid, dialogue served the Movement in developing its identity and its empowerment processes, but if such is the case, then the movement paid a very high price for its dialogue with members of other religions. The price included the opposition of the military, the secular elite, the media and even other Muslim leaders that slandered Gülen. So now comes the question: what did the Gülen Movement gain from these meetings in the first place, if not the desire to conduct dialogue? Moreover, there are great misgivings towards the Movement also among the minorities in Turkey, with whom the dialogue is meant to take place. If so, then it paid off for the Movement to be engaged in dialogue and if it continues to do so, then it explains its importance in the eyes of the Movement and Gülen, as its leader.

³⁹ Razi Canikligil, "Gülen cemaati 25 milyar doları yönetiyor[Gülen Movement is managing 25 billion dollars]", *Hürriyet*, 27 June 2008. see also: "Fethullahçılar Her Yerde" [Followers of Fethullah Gülen are everywhere], *Radikal*, 20 June 1999.

⁴⁰ Fred A. Reed, *Anatolia Junction: a Journey into Hidden Turkey* (Burnaby: Talonbooks, 1999), p. 88.

⁴¹ An interview with Rabbi İshak Haleva, Tel Aviv, 25 May 2005.