

Cast a Stone Upon the Waters

Introduction to Ms. Kiran Bhinder by Eli Rubenstein

Ottawa March of the Living Student Session -Thursday, March 27, 2014

Good evening, Minister Uppal, Ms. Bhinder, March of the Living students, staff & volunteers,

Before I begin my actual remarks, I want you to think of this quote, **"You cast a stone up on the waters, and you never know the distant ripples that may result from that one simple act."**

My name is Eli Rubenstein and I am the National Director of the March of the Living and the March of Remembrance and Hope. I am sure you all know what the March of the Living is - so let me just spend a moment explaining the March of Remembrance and Hope. The March of Remembrance and Hope is a program that was founded about 15 years ago - it is an 8 day journey to Germany and Poland for Canadian University students of all religions, backgrounds and ethnicities, designed to teach the universal lessons of the Holocaust, and about the dangers of hate, intolerance and prejudice.

I am here this evening to introduce one of our guest speakers, Ms. Kiran Bhinder.

I first came across Ms. Bhinder's name, over 20 years ago, in 1993, when Harry Prizant, then the chair of the Ottawa March of the Living delegation, called me about a most remarkable application he had come across.

At that time, the March of the Living was relatively new in Canada - it had only been launched by Jewish Federations of Canada-UIA in 1988, mostly with students from Toronto, Montreal and Winnipeg, and it took a few years for the program to gain truly national interest.

But that application in 1993 was unique - you see it was not from someone of Jewish background - but rather of Sikh heritage - and this was the first time any one outside the Jewish community had ever expressed an interest in the March of the Living - until then it had only been Jewish high school students.

And here, Harry and I were presented with a completed application, that, truthfully, was one of the most eloquent, sincere and well-written applications that either of us had ever seen.

However, we had a number of concerns about accepting the application - the primary one was this: how would Kiran feel being the only person among 400 Canadian students - - and among another about 5,000 from around the world - who was not Jewish? But after discussing these concerns with Kiran, we decided to accept Kiran - and I might add, over the objections of some of our colleagues in other parts of Canada.

For me, at the end of the day, once we were satisfied with Kiran's emotional maturity and sincere desire to participate - and her confidence in her ability to manage despite the fact that she would be the only person of Sikh Heritage on the entire trip - the decision was clear. How could we, the organizers of the March of the Living, a program dedicated to fighting intolerance and racism, refuse to accept someone on this trip, simply because their background was different from ours?

Further, was not one of the saddest aspects of the Holocaust, the indifference and apathy expressed by most of the world to the plight of the Jewish people? Are we not, to this day, still shocked by the "None is Too Many" attitude voiced by our own government during this era - and supported by many so others here in our own country of Canada? And here, finally, we now had someone demonstrating the exact opposite position, expressing empathy, compassion and interest in the tragic history of our people? How could we turn her away?

Was our decision the correct one?

Here is some of what Harry Prizant wrote to me just a few day ago, which he wanted me to share with you this evening:

It really is hard to put into words the feeling you get when one meets Kiran. There is a sense of ease and serenity about her.

The first time we met was when she applied to be part of the March of the Living - I saw, a young girl wearing a turban, not your typical applicant. She was the first non-Jewish person to apply. The policy at that time was - that there was no policy for such an occurrence!!! Despite the objection of some in other communities, we accepted her application and we were immediately moved by her compassion and sensitivity for others.

Kiran impressed the organizers of the trip and was truly an inspiration to everyone around her. She immediately formed a bond between our survivor, Anna Heilman, of blessed memory.

(Anna Heilman was a Holocaust survivor from Ottawa. As a young girl, she was a participant in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, one of the last to be alive in Canada until she passed away a few years ago. Her parents were murdered in Madjanek, and her sister Esther Wacjblum was executed by the Nazis in Auschwitz - Birkenau just two weeks before the Russians liberated Auschwitz - Birkenau for her role in blowing up Crematoria Number IV in Birkenau, an act of resistance that Anna also participated in.)

Harry goes on to say, that Kiran was the one, on many occasions, who led by example amongst her peers through the many emotional episodes that were experienced with the survivor Anna Heilman, and at other emotional times during the March.

He concludes by saying that, Kiran, at such a young age, showed great maturity in her desire and commitment to feel the pain and suffering of other people.

"Her heart is pure and I still feel lucky to have shared the experience with her and to call her a friend.

*I am truly sorry that I cannot be there, but please give her a big hug from me."
Harry Prizant*

Two amazing outcomes resulted from Kiran's application to the 1994 March of the Living - one has to do with the historic landmark, the National Holocaust Memorial, that is about to be built in Ottawa - but I will let Kiran and Minister Uppal explain that amazing story. (As you will soon hear from both Kiran and Minister Uppal, Kiran's participation in the March of the Living had a significant impact on her and on the decision of her husband - Minister Tim Uppal - to champion the parliamentary bill to build a national Holocaust Memorial in Ottawa.)

The other amazing outcome has to do with the founding of the March of Remembrance and Hope program. Because of Kiran's participation - because of her empathy for the suffering of others - we became convinced of the value of opening up the March experience to as many people of all backgrounds and faiths as possible.

After all, if all we do is educate our own people about the Holocaust - we risk the dangers of having another Holocaust of educated Jews. Holocaust education has lessons for all humanity, and must be spread as far and wide as possible - because there are people outside of our community who really do care, who have great empathy for what the Jewish people - and many others - have gone through.

That is what Kiran taught us at the young age of 16 - and just a few years later, in part because of her experience, we founded the March of Remembrance and Hope, a program designed to teach young people of all faiths and backgrounds, the specific and universal lessons of the Holocaust.

Remember my quote from the outset of this introduction: **"You cast a stone up on the waters, and you never know the distant ripples that may result from that one simple act."**

The Holocaust Memorial Monument in Ottawa and the March of Remembrance and Hope - are both significant ripples emanating from that decision to accept Kiran on the 1994 March of the Living and her subsequent experience on the program.

Many of you are familiar with the term, "Hasidei Umot Halom", the Righteous Among the Nations - a term that Yad Vashem has given to over 25,000 people who risked their lives to save Jews during the Shoah.

The designation, however, has existed far earlier than Yad Vashem's creation in 1954, even before the Holocaust, in fact over 2,000 years ago. That is when the rabbis first created the phrase, when they taught us that, "the Righteous Among the Nations have a share in the World to Come".

What that meant, was if you were a kind, and decent, and principled and moral human being, regardless of your religion or background - you were on the right path. That is one of the reasons, Judaism, for the most part, never proselytized - never sought converts, because in order to be a good person, you don't have to be Jewish, you just have to be a good person.

Ladies and Gentleman, I suggest to you that both Kiran Bhinder, and Minister Uppal who will be introduced later, fall into this lofty category, of "Righteous Among the Nations" and it is my distinct honor and pleasure to introduce to you Kiran Bhinder - a true Righteous Among the Nations and a true friend of the Jewish people.

Delivered by Eli Rubenstein, National Director, March of the Living Canada