

## **Address by Stepan Kerkyasharian AM at the inaugural Passover Interfaith Dinner**

**at Sydney Town Hall on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> March 2007 at 6.00 p.m.**

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It would be nice to be able to look back on today from twenty years on. Why do I say that? I do realise it might seem a strange thing to say.

Let me explain. At the moment there are so many people driving us forward to achieve a higher level of understanding and acceptance of our religious faiths. Many people in this room would have been involved in a number of interfaith activities organised by many different groups. Now we have this ground-breaking Passover interfaith dinner, and I pay great tribute to the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies for its vision in organising this historic event. The Jewish community has been part of New South Wales society for a very long time and has made a huge contribution to the social, economic and cultural development of this state.

Tonight I feel the spirit of unity of purpose; the irrepressible desire to live together in peace and harmony. What we all feel here tonight is that the sheer weight of goodwill reflected by this event and many others before should be bottled and dispersed throughout the community.

However; when looking back, from say 2020, we may wonder what this was all about and why it was necessary.

In the intervening years a whole generation will have been educated and have reached adulthood as young Australians for whom religious difference will not be a curiosity or a source of potential friction. That generation will have grown up together as Australians whose families happen to be Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus or Buddhists. Their similarity will be their Australianness. Their difference will be religious faiths which they accept without question.

A very important step along the path to that outcome in the next decade is a publication which I am proud to say the Community Relations Commission funded for the Jewish Board of Deputies and which I am happy and feel privileged to launch here today.

*Understanding Judaism* aims to build a bridge between the Jewish community and other ethnic and faith-based communities. This material will underpin a new community-wide outreach programme with a particularly Australian flavour designed to overcome ignorance and prejudice about the Jewish people, religion and customs.

This publication is about dispelling misinformation about Judaism and building respect for Jewish people and the Jewish faith, to strengthen relationships between different faith communities by facilitating the engagement of Jewish

Australian with non Jewish Australians and allowing them to inform and educate by answering pertinent questions about Judaism.

And, once your ignorance is dispelled, you can accept and move on.

So, this project will explain and present the Jewish experience to those who have little or no contact with Jews.

While significant progress has been made in ethnic and religious relationship building, it is limited to a finite group of people. Much more needs to be done, primarily in ensuring that the correct information about the Jewish people, their culture, religion and identity is disseminated effectively to the widest range of people, and likewise other faiths.

This project will not only teach other cultures about Jewish culture, but it illustrates the common links between all faiths and the differences.

My plea to you people assembled here, representing many faiths, is: seek to know, understand and accept our differences because those differences are the essential elements of our religious traditions. They won't change, so let's accept them and get on with getting on.

To give full meaning and expression to this event, it would be wonderful to see the message taken away from this dinner by all of us, but particularly by the clergy present here, out to others, to their congregations, preaching the message of acceptance and respect for religious difference.

My dream is to know that in the mosques of Sydney on Friday, in the synagogues of Sydney on Saturday and in the churches and cathedrals of Sydney on Sunday, imams and sheiks, rabbis and priests and bishops are promoting tonight's message; that Australians are one people who have many religious beliefs, that those beliefs are essentially about peace and love; but that they are essentially different and probably, as centuries of history testify, irreconcilable.

The message of true love and interfaith harmony is that we accept difference; we accept and respect the right of difference in faith, worship and belief.

I congratulate the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies for this excellent initiative, showing us the way, and I take great pleasure in launching *Understanding Judaism*.

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