

Rutgers event links hatred of Jews and Muslims

Diverse crowd hears discussion of bigotry facing communities



Kenneth Stern, left, the AJC's specialist on anti-Semitism and extremism, and Jack G. Shaheen, second from left, an authority on images of Arabs and Muslims in American popular culture, speak with audience members at Rutgers University. Photos by Debra Rubin

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A program on stereotypical portrayals of Jews and Muslims drew an unusually diverse crowd to the Douglass College Center at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

Some 400 students, faculty, and community members attended the Oct. 17 program, "Going Viral: Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and the Role of the Media," which featured an Arab-American academic and a Jewish specialist on anti-Semitism.

The annual Raoul Wallenberg program of Rutgers' Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, the event was funded by Leon and Toby Cooperman.

The program provided a marked contrast to a series of campus events that raised tensions among the university's pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel activists.

"There are a lot of students, Jewish faculty members, Muslim faculty members, and faculty from all different departments," said Yael Zerubavel, executive director of the Bildner Center, after the event, as audience members continued to engage in animated conversation. "We have many community members who are not part of our usual crowd. This is a very mixed audience. I feel very good that we did this program."

The event featured Jack G. Shaheen, professor emeritus of mass communications at Southern Illinois University and a frequent commentator on Arabs and Muslims in American popular culture, and Kenneth Stern, the American Jewish Committee's specialist on anti-Semitism and extremism.

The event was moderated by Clement Price, Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor and founding director of the Institute in Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience at Rutgers Newark, which cosponsored the program along with the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, the Department of Jewish Studies, and the Middle Eastern studies program.

Shaheen compared Islamophobic images in America to the anti-Jewish propaganda in prewar and Holocaust-era Germany, in which the facial features and dress of Jews were mocked in cartoons, and fears were planted about Jews trying to take over the economy.

"These stereotypical images do not happen in a vacuum," said Shaheen. "If we conjure up these myths over and over again, we lose sight of the fact these are individuals and accept the mythology."

Similarly, the portrayal of Japanese in movies and the media laid the groundwork for the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. "They weren't [seen as] American citizens," said Shaheen. "They were 'Japs' even though they were as American as everybody else."

Shaheen said the public was being "assaulted with fear" of Arabs and Muslims to such an extent that "the word 'mosque' conjures up fear."

After 9/11 "all Muslims became terrorists," said Shaheen. "Not only were Muslims guilty but American Muslims and Arabs were thrown into the mix."

One of the most troubling incidents, he said, was the campaign by opponents of President Barack Obama to label him a Muslim. However, Shaheen said, he was almost as disappointed in the president's response.

"What he didn't say is, 'No, I'm not a Muslim, but what if I were? Why would it matter?'" Shaheen said. "I'm still waiting for that response."

Stern said Jews, who have also been singled out for centuries as targets of hatred, share "a common denominator" with Muslims.

"Hatred as a normative human condition has been around for as long as there have been humans," he said. "We know too little about how hate works."

Stern said that a message of tolerance "from the point of view of our grandchildren" should be conveyed or "they will be vilifying and killing each other."

However, there are far more anti-Semitic hate crimes in the United States than those directed against Muslims, said Stern. There is also often “coupling” of hatred among people who profess both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

“You know the best predictor of being anti-Muslim?” he asked. “It’s anti-Semitism. Those who are anti-Semitic are most likely to also become anti-Muslim.”



Rutgers Newark professor Clement Price speaks with a community member at the Oct. 17 program on Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and the Media, which he moderated.

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