

Why Should Jews Dialogue With Christians?

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The most basic reason why Jews should be involved in dialogue with Christians is rooted in the logic and legitimacy of the Jewish halachic imperative of self defense. Ignorance breeds prejudice and bigotry, and the more Christians have a positive familiarity with Jews and Judaism, the more the negative images of the past will be overcome.

Ironically today, medieval Christian anti-Semitism has been resuscitated and adapted in the context of the Middle East conflict and the broader complexities of relations between cultures. This has made the defensive need for constructive inter-religious dialogue all the more imperative.

Beyond this most basic need is the recognition that Judaism and Christianity share the most basic ethical values.

The medieval sage Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri of Perpignan acknowledges this in describing Christians and Muslims as “peoples bound by the ways of religion.” (His rejection of any designation of Christians as “idolaters” serves as the basis for the rulings of Chief Rabbis Kuk and Herzog of Israel, advocating for full civil liberties for Christians and Muslims in a Jewish State as a halachic obligation!) Moreover if we are truly committed to principles of justice and equity, the sanctity of life and family, the pursuit of peace and loving-kindness, then we have an obligation to work together with those that share these values, to be greater than the sum of our different parts.

However many Jewish luminaries not only acknowledged the fact of shared moral values between Christianity and Judaism, but also a shared Biblical heritage from which these values are drawn. Moreover in doing so there was a recognition of certain shared beliefs notwithstanding those that divide.

Instructive in this regard are the words of the Be'er HaGolah, Rabbi Moshe Rivkes, on the Shulchan Aruch, Chosen Mishpat, sect. 425: “The peoples in whose shade we, the people of Israel, take refuge and amongst whom we are dispersed, do believe in the Creation and the Exodus and in the main principles of religion and their whole intent is to serve the Maker of Heaven and Earth as the codifiers wrote and thus is brought in the Rama in Orach Chayim Sect. 156. Not only are we obliged to save them from danger but we are also commanded to pray for their welfare, as the author of Ma’aseh Hashem (R. Eliezer Ashkenazi) explained in his commentary on the Haggadah on the verse “pour out they wrath....”

Rabbi Jacob Emden went even further and in the words of the Ethics of the Fathers described Christianity (Seder Olam Rabba 33-35; Sefer HaShimush 15-17) as “*Knessiyah leshem shamayim shesofah lehitkayem*,” an assembly for the sake of Heaven that is of lasting value and purpose. (The word “*knessiyah*”, assembly, is also the Hebrew word for “church”!)

Contained within these views of Christianity is another – arguably even higher – imperative for advancing Christian-Jewish relations beyond those aforementioned. Any recognition of shared commitment to God’s presence revealed both in Creation and in History and to His word revealed in the Hebrew Bible places special responsibility upon us towards those who also affirm it, making us, whether we like it or not, partners in the pursuit of the Universal Kingdom of Heaven on earth in keeping with that Biblical vision. This might be a particularly difficult idea for many Jews to digest, primarily for historical reasons. However, the fact that all too often so-called Christian behavior towards Jews made a mockery of the Christian gospel should not blind us to the content of the latter that espouses what Rivkes describes as “the main principles of religion” that emanate from the belief in God as Lord of the Creation and of the Exodus.

Accordingly the very fact that this message has been perverted in the name of Christianity should precisely itself be of concern to us as Jews, for the desecration of those values distances us and our world from the ultimate Messianic vision, just as their espousal brings us closer to it. If Christianity is acknowledged to espouse beliefs and values that the Jewish people believe to be amongst those fundamental teachings that it brought to the world and for which it was elected, and as Judaism aspires for their recognition and fulfillment in the whole world, then their desecration, especially by those claiming to represent these beliefs and values among the Gentiles, must be our Jewish concern. Such a “*chilul HaShem*,” desecration of the Divine name, demands our attention too! The positive image of Christianity as a bearer of such values is relevant to our own holy task of Kiddush HaShem, sanctifying God’s name! Moreover, in that desecration that has been perpetrated in the past in the name of Christianity, not only have we suffered so greatly as a people, but the image of our own testimony and purpose has been perverted as well! By correcting this distortion; by restoring and promoting the image and glory of our Torah through dialogue and joint cooperation, we rectify the desecration of God’s Name and sanctify it instead. This sanctification of the Divine name amongst the nations is a pre-eminent religious responsibility, fundamental to Israel’s purpose and destiny. Thus through working together towards goals that we share, we not only are stronger than the sum of our different parts in working for common goals and a substantially shared hope for the establishment of a world that lives in accordance with God’s “moral ways,” but we are also partners in the principle biblical charge itself “to sanctify God’s Name” in the world.