

Jewish Approaches to Dialogue

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While Judaism is the particular religious way of life of a particular people born out of particular historical experiences, its purpose and aspiration is universal. Abraham himself is told to "be a blessing" (Genesis ch. 12 v.2) and that through him and his seed, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.

The Covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants is ratified at Sinai where the children of Israel are called to be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation (Exodus ch. 19 v.6). This mandate to sanctify God's Name (Leviticus ch.22 v.32) is perceived within Biblical Tradition in two ways; through the very existence of the children of Israel in history as testimony to the Divine Presence (Isaiah ch. 43 v.10, Ezekiel ch.36 v.23) and through the commitment to the way of life and precepts, revealed in the Pentateuch. The ultimate goal for this world that the Jewish people is to help bring about accordingly, is a society in which all men and women live in keeping with the Divine Will, in justice, righteousness and peace, i.e. - the Messianic ideal (Isaiah ch. 11 v. 9, 10).

This vision it should be pointed out, is not a denationalized one, but an international vision, in which "many peoples shall go and say let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob and He will teach us His ways and we will walk in His Paths."...."nation shall not lift up sword against nation and they shall not learn war any more" (Isaiah ch. 2 v. 3-4). In other words, the vision is not of a society in which everyone is Jewish (see also Zecharia ch. 14 v. 16), but rather a society in which while there is shared recognition of the Divine Presence and the ethical values that flow there from, particular identities, loyalties and traditions remain, born out of different cultural and historical factors.

Indeed Judaism teaches that all humankind is "called", "commanded", from the outset, to live such righteous lives. Jewish tradition understands all Humankind as "covenanted" with God through the Covenant with the Children of Noah made after the flood. (Genesis ch. 9 v. 9) The Tradition understands the demands of this covenant to consist of seven commandments - the quintessence of universal morality. These are the prohibitions against murder, idolatry, theft, incest, blasphemy, dismembering of any living animal and the command to establish courts of justice (Bereshit Rabbah 34,8). One who lives in accordance with the demands of the Noahide Covenant is not only perceived as a righteous gentile (who merits the World to Come) but under the rule of Jewish Law enjoys status of "ger toshav", the resident gentile who is entitled to all civil rights as well as obligations of the society (Maimonides, Issurei Biah ch. 14 hal. 7, Melachim ch. 10 hal.12).

Nevertheless for the first millennium and half of Jewish history, gentile acceptance of Noahide standards was seen as exceptional and individual. Society at large in the world was perceived as idolatrous and corrupt, pagan and degenerate.

Early institutional Christianity did not change that Jewish perception. The establishment of the Holy Roman Empire and its hostility towards the Jewish people, enabled Judaism to view early Christianity as just another version of pagan power. Even the acknowledgement of fundamental positive aspects in Christianity and Islam (as by Yehudah Halevi and Maimonides) in spreading knowledge of the One God and His moral Ways and Commandments, paving the way for universal messianic redemption, did not mitigate that basic perception.

Judaism viewed Islam more positively (e.g. Maimonides Resp. 448) as "uncompromised" by what were seen as problematic doctrines such as the incarnation and the trinity; as well as the use of effigies etc. However it was precisely in the encounter with Islam that Jewish thinkers encountered collectives, nations, whose ethos was a religious ethical one. This in turn impacted on the way some began to view Christianity. While

Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri of Perpignan (13-14th centuries) taught that both Christians as well as Muslims should be viewed in the category of "nations bound by the ways of religion", the predominant perception of Christianity was one of "flawed monotheism" at best. This was defined in the term "shittuf", literally, "partnership", or "association" of an additional power with God Himself. However, the pragmatic position emerged that while "shittuf" would compromise Mosaic monotheism and was thus prohibited to Jews; it was not incompatible with the Noahide prohibitions and thus Christians were not idolaters. (Tosafot Sanhedrin 63b and Bechorot 2b) (This position was bolstered by reference to the statement in the Talmud, tractate Chullin 13b, that excludes all gentiles outside the land of Israel from the category of idolaters).

This positive attitude of the Meiri frequently found its echo amongst Ashkenazi luminaries, well before the effects of Emancipation and the Enlightenment. Notable amongst them, the Be'er HaGolah, (R. Moshe Rivkes) in the early 17th century and in the 18th century, the Chavot Yair (R. Yair Bachrach), the Noda BiYehudah (R. Yechezkel Landau); and especially Rabbi Yacov Emden (Ya'avetz).

Instructive in this regard are the words of the Be'er HaGolah, Rabbi Moshe Rivkes (Shulchan Aruch, Choshen 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 it is thus stated by Rabbi Moshe Isserlis in Orach Chayim, section 156. We are obliged to save them from danger and are even commanded to pray for their welfare, as Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi the author of Ma'aseh Hashem explained in his commentary on the Haggadah on the verse "pour out thy wrath..."

Rabbi Rivkes' reference to Christians sharing with Jews not only belief in the God of Creation but also belief in the same God as God of the Exodus, implies a factor emphasized by others subsequently; namely, shared religious history and Scriptures. What is recognized here accordingly is the special

relationship and metier between those who share the Hebrew Bible and its history.

On the basis of the position of the Meiri (Bet Habehirah, Bava Kama, 113b) recognizing both Muslims and Christians as monotheistic believers bound by the minimal moral code, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in Israel, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kuk ruled (Iggeret 89; Mishpat-Cohen 63) that Muslims and Christians living in a predominant Jewish society must be treated as gerim toshavim, i.e., with full civil liberties, just as Jews. (Similarly, the First Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, Rabbi I.H. Herzog - "The Rights of Minorities according to Halacha" T'chumin 2, 5741).

Yet it would be disingenuous to describe such positive attitudes towards Christianity as advocating dialogue.

Moses Mendelsohn, usually seen as the pioneer of enlightenment Jewish thinking, went a step further.

He attempted to find ways to bridge the gaps between the mutual perceptions of the two faiths and declared his readiness to acknowledge the innocence and goodness of Jesus with the caveats that: (a) he never meant to regard himself as equal with "the Father"; (b) he never proclaimed himself as a person of divinity; (c) he never presumptuously claimed the honor of worship; and (d) he did not intend to subvert the faith of his fathers. He complained that quarrels between Judaism and Christianity merely lead to the general weakening of religion – a theme that was to re-emerge after the Second World War. To quote Mendelssohn's noble words:

"It is unbecoming for one of us to openly defy the other and thereby furnish diversion to the idle, scandal to the simple and malicious exultation to the revilers of truth and virtue. Were we to analyze our aggregate stock of knowledge, we certainly shall concur in so many important truths that I venture to say few individuals of one and the same religious persuasion would more harmonize in thinking. A point here and there on which we might

perhaps still divide might be adjourned for some ages longer, without detriment to the welfare of the human race. What a world of bliss we would live in did all men adopt the true principles which the best among the Christians and the best among the Jews have in common”.

It would still be a long time before his vision would gain wide acceptance.

Subsequent German Jewish enlightenment thinkers in the nineteenth century, such as Solomon Formstecher and Solomon Steinheim, and even the neo-Orthodox leader Samuel Rafael Hirsch, were willing to allot an honored place to Christianity, albeit an inferior one to that of Judaism.

In particular, they singled out and attached what they discerned as pagan elements in Christianity, amongst which they numbered transubstantiation, the cult of relics, the institution of sainthood, and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Under the circumstances, the polemics were inevitable. Nevertheless a more polished approach of the essential Halevian/Maimonidean approach began to hold sway. Thus Formstecher characterized Christianity and Islam as the northern and southern missions of Judaism to the pagan world. But even here, the daughter religions pave the way via the mother.

The influential early twentieth century philosopher, Hermann Cohen, wrote extensive critiques of Christianity, but nevertheless sensed a deep relation between Judaism and Christianity, especially in its Protestant manifestations, with their emphasis on the believing individual. Cohen saw the connection between Judaism and Christianity in a life of reason, which he saw Judaism as having attained in greater measure.

The seminal figures in the evolution of modern Jewish attitudes to Christianity leading to the dialogue were Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. It has been said that Rosenzweig was the first Jewish theologian to view Christianity as equally legitimate as Judaism, both having their origin in the Divine. He affirms that the vocation of Christianity is to bring the nations of the world to the covenant and on this basis, Judaism and Christianity can recognize the integrity of the other. Accordingly they should strive for mutual understanding, not change. Rosenzweig sees them as united at the end of time, but

meanwhile neither religion must attempt to adopt the path of the other. Christianity, for him, is on its way to its goal; but Judaism has arrived, for a Christian has to become a Christian – he is born a heathen; but a Jew is born (into the Covenant as) a Jew.

Buber, like Rosenzweig, felt that we can acknowledge as a mystery that which someone else confesses as the reality of his faith, even though it opposes our own knowledge. This means recognizing Christianity as a path to God and demanding that Christianity recognize Judaism as a path to God. It also involves rejection of the Christian claim to a monopoly of the path to salvation. Buber distinguished between two types of faith: *emuna*, the biblical pattern, which was the faith of Jesus; and the Greek *pistis*, embodied in Paul. The faith of Jesus was broad, dealing with the problems of all people; that of Paul was chiefly interested in the individual and in human salvation through Jesus. Buber felt that Christianity required a change of emphasis back from *pistis* to *emuna*. The Jew carries the burden of the unredeemed world. He knows that redemption is not an accomplished fact and knows of no redeemer who has appeared at one point in history to inaugurate a new and redeemed history.

“We Jews”, he wrote, “do not perceive any caesura in history, no midpoint, but only a goal – the goal of the way to God, and do not pause on our way”. At the same time he allows for the possibility that God may have revealed himself to Jesus but cannot ascribe finality to any of his revelations nor to anyone the idea of the incarnation. To Buber it was justification by faith which separated Judaism from Christianity. Nevertheless he looked forward to the time when the Jews would recognize Jesus as a great religious figure, calls Jesus ‘my brother’, and insists that the gates of God are open to all. Just as the Christian need not go through Judaism, the Jew does not need to go through Christianity to come to God. No-one outside Israel can understand the mystery of Israel, he declares, and no-one outside Christianity can understand the mystery of Christendom. In response to the question ‘How can the mysteries stand side by side?’ he answers that ‘that itself is God’s mystery.’

Similar to the neo-Orthodox Jewish leader Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, Buber also highlights the centrality of Jewish peoplehood in Judaism as one of the main and necessary points of distinction between Judaism and Christianity. Indeed Hirsch points out that the essential particularity of Jewry's character and destiny are its limitations; and in order for Christianity to fulfill its global destiny, it had to break away from the people that gave birth to it.

Inevitably emancipation led to an eventual greater mutual familiarity and appreciation between Jews and Christians; and therefore the encounter and the value of the encounter was experienced and promoted in the more modern communities by the more liberal strands of Judaism.

Thus what has its origins substantially in the German speaking world, develops overwhelmingly in the English speaking world and in the United States of America in particular.

The degree of perceived and desired mutuality is summed up in the words of one of the leading twentieth century American Jewish scholars on Christianity and its relationship to Judaism, the reform rabbi Samuel Sandmel.

"I do not regard Judaism as objectively superior to Christianity, nor Christianity to Judaism. Rather Judaism is mine and I consider it good and I am at home in it and I love it. That is how I want Christians to feel about their Christianity."

All proponents of dialogue referred to its necessity to engender mutual respect, combat bigotry and misrepresentation. In the wake of the Shoah, to which I shall refer below, this became an even greater imperative.

However there were those who hoped for more theologically.

Martin Buber had called for Jews and Christians "to show a religious respect for the true faith of the other. This is not what is called tolerance; our task is not to tolerate each other's waywardness, but to acknowledge the real relationship in which both stand to the truth. Whenever we both, Christian and Jew, care more for God Himself than for our images of God, we are united in the feeling that our Father's house is differently constructed than our human models take it to be."

However Buber affirms that Jews and Christians have in common “a book and an expectation” and that this commonality challenges us in our relationship. “To you the book is a forecourt; to us it is the sanctuary. But in this place we can dwell together and together listen to the voice that speaks here. That means that we can work together to evoke the buried speech of that voice; together we can redeem the imprisoned living word.

Your expectation is directed toward a second coming; ours to a coming which has not been anticipated by a first. To you the phrasing of world history is determined by one absolute midpoint, the year nought. To us, it is an unbroken flow of tones following each other without a pause from their origin to their consummation. But we can wait for the advent of the One together, and there are moments when we may prepare the way before him together.”

“Preparing the way” in the sense of religious and ethical collaboration is precisely the purpose of Jewish-Christian engagement according to the Conservative Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel.

“It is neither to flatter nor to refute one another, but to help one another; to share insight and learning, to cooperate in academic venture on the highest scholarly level; and what is even more important, to search in the wilderness for wellsprings of devotion, for treasures of stillness, for the power of love and care for man. What is urgently needed are ways of helping one another in the terrible predicament of here and now by the courage to believe that the word of the Lord endures forever as well as here and now; to cooperate in trying to bring about a resurrection of sensitivity, a revival of conscience; to keep alive the divine sparks in our souls, to nurture openness to the spirit of the Psalms, reverence for the words of the prophets, and faithfulness to the living God.”

The US Reform theologian Eugene Borowitz is perhaps blunter about the common challenge that Jews and Christians face.

“A secularism unguided by Christianity and paying no attention to its handful of believing Jews, would become a new paganism, one far more dangerous

than anything the prophets and rabbis fought against – Judaism has far more in common with Christianity than with a secularism gone pagan.”

As indicated, views such as those articulated by Heschel and Borowitz reflect the significant degree of self-confidence that modern Jewish communities had found in a new world.

However, undeniably one of the major factors in the history of and the transformation in Christian-Jewish relations, was the Shoah. As Christian scholars like Flannery and Edwards have pointed out; even if it was the product of a pagan ideology, it took place in ostensibly Christian lands perpetrated overwhelmingly by baptized Christians; and it would not have been able to have succeeded to the extent that it did without the fertilization of centuries of Christian teaching of contempt towards the Jews rendering the latter literally demonized and dehumanized.

This proved to be a profound impetus for many Christians to purify their communities of this poison; and a major impulse for Jews to protect their communities from such tragic consequences of bigotry and prejudice.

Indeed for many it became the main purpose of the dialogue.

The philosopher Emil Fackenheim was ordained as a German Reform rabbi. He was interned by the Nazis in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, but escaped to Britain from where he was sent for internment in a camp in Canada where he spent most of his life before retiring to Jerusalem.

For him the primary moral imperative for Jews that flows from the tragedy of the Shoah is the obligation to survive and to deny Hitler a “posthumous victory”; and accordingly the fundamental obligation that the Shoah demands of Christians, is to recognize and support the integrity and vitality of the Jewish People. Indeed he sees this as essential for the salvation of Christianity itself. Jewish-Christian engagement therefore is necessary to ensure the future of Jewry in which Christianity has a fundamental stake (which it has denied for most of its history.) This position of course relates inextricably to the State of Israel.

However the Shoah also served to reinforce some of those opposing dialogue with Christians, especially within the Orthodox Jewish world which by definition had been less open to and influenced by the winds of modernity.

Notable in this regard was Rabbi Eliezer Berkowitz, also a refugee from Nazism. He describes the world after the Shoah as a post-Christian world and sees Christian ecumenism as reflecting Christendom's loss of power. Christians are only now interested in the freedom of religion, he declares, because they are interested in the freedom of Christians. He perceives Christian civilization and Christianity as morally bankrupt especially after the Shoah; and Jewish engagement with Christianity as accordingly lacking in self-respect. The Christian world needs to demonstrate far more consistently and thoroughly over generations that it has repented and purified itself of its sins against Jewry before any such engagement can be contemplated.

While Berkowitz's view is articulated rather harshly, it is not eccentric in Orthodox Jewish circles and is probably normative within haredi ultra-Orthodoxy. However in the main, the disinterest in dialogue within haredi society (and to a degree within non-haredi Orthodoxy as well) is born more out of a "fundamentalist" linear view of truth ("mine is the true path and as it is not yours, yours is not true") as well as a residual mediaeval view of Christianity as quasi-idolatrous. Above all, the haredi world outlook is a reactionary withdrawal from the modern world and thus isolationist by definition.

Nevertheless Modern Orthodox leadership in post-war Europe, such as Chief Rabbis Hertz in Britain and Kaplan of France, were prominent in the nascent Christian-Jewish dialogue.

In the US, the personality who assumed predominance in modern Orthodox circles (and still does so even after his death) was Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik . He forged something of a middle ground position in a famous article written in the early 1960s (see Tradition Vol.6 No.2)

While advocating cooperation with Christians on matters of shared social and ethical concern and advocacy, he declares in effect that there is no point in

theological dialogue that relates to the “inner life” of faith affirmation. Accordingly the Jewish community must always be mindful of the mystery of the uniqueness of its being and must not expose the inner life of its faith to interreligious dialogue.

There has been much debate, commentary and critique (even within Orthodox Jewish circles), on Soloveitchik’s position and his motives; especially as he himself apparently did participate in theological discussions with Christians.

Nevertheless, the position of maintaining a distinction between theological dialogue (to be avoided) and shared consultations and collaboration on social and ethical matters (as desirable), has been maintained by mainstream Orthodox Jewry in the US and has had some impact further abroad as well.

In order to incorporate American Jewish Orthodoxy in IJCIC, the latter officially abides by this distinction as its collective policy.

As indicated, the significance of the State of Israel for Jewry as a whole takes on even greater significance and implications in the wake of the Shoah. However, of course any basic understanding of Judaism appreciates the fundamental relationship between the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, as intrinsic to Jewry’s original and ongoing identity.

As Rabbi Henry Siegman, one-time director of the Synagogue Council of America (and one of the founders of IJCIC) put it:-

“even if Israel were to pose a political rather than a theological problem, the warmest theological friendships would be meaningless and utterly without human content if they could contemplate the collapse of Israel with equanimity. But in fact, Israel presents not only a political issue but the profoundest theological implications. The State of Israel is the result not only of modern forces of nationalism or even of persecution, but it is the actualization of a quest for authenticity.”

Accordingly the previous British chief rabbi, Lord Immanuel Jakobovits stated that “In the self-definition of Judaism, a major impact is bound to be made by

the restoration of Jewish sovereignty. Any redefinition of Church attitudes to the Jewish People which leaves this fundamental change out of account, is incomplete. Quite irrelevant are differences of opinion over particular Israeli governmental policies.” The recognition of Israel’s legitimacy and its right to a secure existence, is thus in effect, the expression of true respect for Jewish historical and contemporary identity.

One of the outstanding hurdles for Christian-Jewish relation is the subject of mission, witness and/or proselytization.

For very many Jews the very idea that one is perceived as incomplete and in need of Christian witness is offensive and renders dialogue impossible. Accordingly some Jews will only enter into dialogue with those who have clearly rejected such a theology and accepted the full integrity of their Jewish interlocutors.

Jakob Josef Petuchowski, one time professor of Judeo-Christian Studies at Hebrew Union College of the US Reform movement , in Cincinnati Ohio, offered a more generous formula in the following statement :-

“While I as a Jew have no right to demand from my Christian neighbor that he give up an essential part of his religious obligation in order to suit my Jewish convenience, I would plead with him to have some regard for both historical realities and the power of God. I would point out to him the rather meager harvest in Jewish souls which the Church has been able to reap since it started its mission to the Jews some two thousand years ago; and I would raise the question whether the present time holds out more hope for success than all previous times have done. I would suggest that bringing about the eschaton is a task to be shared by both God and man; and I would raise the question whether, even from a Christian perspective, the ultimate conversion of the Jews might not well be an act which God has reserved to Himself?”

However Henry Siegman suggested a way in which conflicting interests may co-exist in a respectful manner. If those talking to each other have given up in advance any intention, hope or desire of convincing the other, what is the

point of dialogue, he asks. If Jews ask Christians to renounce any hope of converting Jews, does not this mean that we are willing to talk onto to those Christians who are less secure in their faith than we are in ours? We should avoid dialogue with Christians for whom Judaism is a lifeless fossil – this is a useless exercise. But honest and respectful relations are possible with those who see present-day Judaism as an expression of Divine providence even if they claim for Christianity a greater degree of truth. If we Jews demand Christian understanding of our own self-definition, we must give considerable consideration to Christian self-definition which includes the mandate to go forth and spread the truth of Christianity. Witness is a legitimate religious enterprise as long as it full respects the freedom of conscience of men of other faiths.

Others including the Orthodox American Jewish scholar David Berger, have argued along similar lines.

This presentation on Jewish approaches to dialogue with Christians would not be complete without reference to two modern declarations .

The first was the 1993 International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) theological statement entitled: Jews and Christians in Search of a Common Religious Basis for Contributing Towards a Better World. This was divided into sections on Christian perspectives, Jewish perspectives and joint perspectives.

The Jewish section provided four reasons for Jews to engage in dialogue with Christians:-

1. the need to take a *common stand* against ignorance, prejudice, bigotry and their violent manifestations on the basis of the affirmation – shared with Christians and other people of faith – of the Divine Presence in our world;

2. the existence of a *common agenda* indicated by those tenets and values (e.g. the belief in God as Creator, the commitment to the Noachide commandments, the Decalogue, as well as the expectation of God's rule over the whole earth) which Jews and Christians hold in common due to their shared biblical and historical roots;
3. the sanctification of God's name in cooperation with all people who live in accordance with God's ways; and the possibility of *partnership* with Christians in *sanctifying God's Name* before society at large.
4. the opportunity to *know and love God* more deeply by seeking God in every place, especially where the knowledge of God is experienced in the lives and spirituality of people of other faiths. In religious encounters with the righteous from among the nations, Jews are exposed to other perspectives of the Omnipresent that are not encapsulated totally in one Tradition; thus they gain a deeper experience of the Divine.

In contrast to this statement which was not widely publicized and basically was known only to those involved with the work of the ICCJ; in the year 2000 a statement appeared as a full page advertisement in the New York Times, sponsored by the Baltimore Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies and signed by hundreds of rabbis from the different Jewish denominations. It thus enjoyed widespread exposure and overwhelmingly positive reception, even though it was not without its critics. The statement entitled "Dabru Emet" ("Speak the Truth") was formulated by four Conservative and Reform Jewish scholars. Its basic points were that:-

1. Jews and Christians worship the same God (even though Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews. Nevertheless, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel)
2. Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book -- the Bible (what Jews call "Tanakh" and Christians call the "Old Testament").

3. Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel (while the declaration also affirms that Jewish tradition mandates justice for all non-Jews who reside in a Jewish state.)
4. Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah (which should be the basis of a powerful witness to all humanity for improving the lives of our fellow human beings and for standing against the immoralities and idolatries that harm and degrade us - a witness that is especially needed after the unprecedented horrors of the past century.)
5. That Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon. Even if the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews enabled Nazi ideology and atrocities.)
6. The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture.
7. A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice. Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.
8. That Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.