

JUDAISM AND INTER-RELIGIOUS CO-EXISTENCE

By Rabbi David Rosen

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. Society at large in the world was perceived as idolatrous and corrupt, pagan and degenerate.

Early Christianity did not change that Jewish perception. Originally seen as a sectary, the emergence of the Holy Roman Empire, the crystallization of its theology and its hostility towards the Jewish people, enabled Judaism to view early Christianity as just a new version of pagan power. Even the acknowledgement of fundamental positive aspects in Christianity, as on the part of Yehudah Halevi and Maimonides, did not mitigate that basic perception. Theologically, Judaism viewed Islam more positively. (Maimonides Resp. 448).

Yet in Christian lands Jewish scholars occasionally grappled with what appeared to them to be the contradictions between the ethical monotheism of Christianity that taught principles of Providence, Revelation, Reward and Punishment on the one hand; and on the other, those doctrines, as well as the use of effigies, that were perceived as idolatrous.

While the noted Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri of Perpignan (13-14th centuries) seemed to have had no such difficulty and taught that both Christians as well as Muslims should be viewed in the category of "nations bound by the ways of religion", there was a predominant perception of Christianity as "flawed monotheism". 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 actual 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). Yet the 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) and the Noda BiYehudah (R. Yechezkel Landau).

Instructive in this regard are the words of the Be'er HaGolah, Rabbi Moshe Rivkes, on the 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 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" Tchumin 2, 5741).

However as indicated at the outset, ideal Jewish religious conduct is predicated on more than the legal protection and civil rights guaranteed to Noahides, gerim toshavim.

Maimonides makes this clear in his legal magnum opus, Yad Hachazakah, Hilchot Melachim ch. 10 halacha 12. After quoting the Talmud (Gittin 61) concerning the obligation to visit the sick, even of heathens; to bury their dead with the Jewish dead and to provide

for their poor together with the Jewish poor, in order to advance "ways of peace"; he adds the following verses: Behold it is stated "God is good to all and His mercy is to all His creatures" (Psalm 145 v.9), and it is stated "Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace" (Proverbs ch. 3 v. 17). The latter quotation appears in the Talmudic passage preceding the above (Gittin 59b) which declares that "the whole Torah itself is for the sake of 'the ways of peace' as it is written 'Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths are peace'". Maimonides thus follows the Talmud in affirming that the Torah requires us in fact to go beyond the letter of the law, in order to serve the teleology of Torah, namely, peace and good will to all.

However, Maimonides goes further than the aforementioned Talmudic text. It is not only the societal teleology of Torah that requires us to behave in this manner, he declares, but also and perhaps above all, the highest personal religious goal: "Behold God is good to all and His mercies extend to all His creatures", and precisely therefore says Maimonides we must behave accordingly. Maimonides thus emphasizes the Biblical commandment and goal of Imitatio Dei (Leviticus ch. 19 v.1). In the words of Abba Shaul, "Just as He is gracious and merciful so you be gracious and merciful" (Mekhilta, Canticles, 3).

Judaism views it as both our personal religious duty as well as our societal religious obligation to be compassionate and caring towards all, even heathens; how much more so then, towards believers and righteous gentiles.

Of course the religio-ethical imperative in relation to all human beings is rooted in the Biblical concept of the Image of God in which all persons are created (Genesis ch. 1 v. 27). Thus as Ben Azai and Rabbi Tanhuma teach (Bereshit Rabbah, 24), disregard for the dignity of any human being is disregard for God Himself (see

also, Korban Aharon on Sifra Kedoshim 4, 12; Tiferet Yisrael on Avot ch. 3 m. 14; Netziv, Introd. to commentary on Genesis).

Moreover the pursuit of justice and righteousness for all, is not only a goal of the Messianic era, but in fact we are told that it is only through the pursuit of justice and righteousness that Redemption will take place (Isaiah ch. 1 v. 27).

Furthermore, inextricably linked to such Redemption and to the above conduct, is the higher (if not highest) value, to which reference was also made at the outset. Namely, the obligation upon Jews both individually and collectively, to sanctify God's Name through their conduct, before society at large (Bereshit Rabbah 49, 16; Maimonides Hilchot Eduyot, ch. 1 hal. 2).

For this reason the Tosefta (Bava Kama ch. 10) declares an offense by a Jew against a heathen to be a worse sin than when it is done to another Jew, because it involves a universal desecration of the Divine Name. Accordingly our sages declare (Yalkut on Deuteronomy ch. 6 v. 5 and similarly in Seder Eliyahu Rabbah ch. 26) "See that you yourself are beloved by human beings and keep far from sin and theft from Jew, heathen and from any person...for the Torah was only given to sanctify God's Name, as it says: 'And I will put a sign on them...and they shall declare my glory among the gentiles' (Isaiah ch. 66 v. 19)".

The obligation to be respectful and ethically meticulous in our relations with all people, Jews and non-Jews, is thus central to the Jewish ethos and purpose, as well as to its destiny. By living accordingly we sanctify His Name and merit the Divine Promise of that destiny for the people of Israel gathered and living in its Land as envisaged by the prophet Ezekiel in ch. 37 v. 26, "And I will

establish a Covenant of Peace with them - it shall be an eternal covenant with them".