

The Relationship between Jews and Evangelicals in Israel

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I have been asked to address the relationship between Jews and Evangelicals in Israel. In order to do so, I believe it is necessary to place such relations in the wider context of inter-faith relations at large and to view the particularity of the former in that context.

I must confess at the outset that, as an Orthodox Rabbi, my views are not typical on the subject. Many in the Orthodox community, indeed most of the Orthodox community in Israel, have no interest in inter-religious relations and often are opposed to such. Such opposition stems both from theological arguments and socio-historical factors which may be debated. I will not go into these here, but rather will put forward the rationales used by those of us who favor inter-religious dialogue.

The most basic and successful rationale is that of defense. Ignorance breeds prejudice and thus threatens communities' well being. Through getting to know one another, we can break down the barriers of prejudice and stereotypes and do a great deal to neutralize bigotry and promote mutual respect.

Of course, this argument works better where one is a minority. However even in Israel Jews can be persuaded that it is desirable to counteract inter-religious hostility, even if they see it at best as only a matter of "damage control."

A "higher" basis for inter-religious communication is the perception of a "common agenda". As Abraham Joshua Heschel stated a la John Dunne, "No religion is an island." Today in the West, we are all minorities in an overwhelmingly secular world. The challenge that confronts us is a common one in which we who affirm the Transcendent in the world, and a moral code accordingly, are partners who can be greater than the sum of our different parts through cooperation and concert.

Beyond this, however, is what I consider to be the "highest spiritual purpose of inter-religious relations, and for me it emerged out of the former.

As I encountered persons of other faiths, I began to perceive a paradox of which I had also been guilty. Indeed, today I would even call it a contradiction in terms. We, who have proclaimed our faith in one God as Universal and Omnipresent, at the same time have sought to encapsulate Him exclusively in one tradition or another. Obviously, as He has created us in our diversity, so there must be many diverse ways to approach Him. That has, in fact, been stated by our different traditions, and yet within each of our traditions there are many who still seek to claim a monopoly on the "hotline!" For me, this idea is not only ridiculous but sacrilegious, for it limits the encounter with the Divine.

Any encounter with my neighbor created in the Divine image is an encounter with the Omnipresent. However, where I encounter my neighbor's experience and expression of the Divine in his or her life, there I encounter the Divine Presence to a far greater degree.

The encounter with the faith of others, even and perhaps especially when it is not my own, is a glimpse of the Omnipresent Himself, beyond the small world, the tradition, of which I am a part. For me, this is still the case even if the encounter is with those who claim - however mistakenly – that their path is the only complete path to the Divine.

Yet within this inter-religious encounter, there are certain special relationships born out of historic and religious factors. One of these unique relationships is that of Christianity and Judaism. From a Jewish perspective, Christianity moved from being an internal misguided, if not heretical sect, to become another faith, whose theology and sometimes even practice was considered, if not idolatrous, then quasi-idolatrous.

Moreover, the tragic history of Jewish suffering in the Christian world and the use of religious rationales to justify such meant that in the main, there was little inclination, let alone opportunity, for positive Jewish-Christian engagement. Of course, there were exceptions, and many Jewish religious authorities referred to those positive values that Christianity brought to the world at large.

It was Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri of Perpignan who, in the thirteenth century, made the quantum leap, recognizing peoples of Islam and Christianity as “peoples bound by the ways of religion.” Yet amongst Rabbinic authorities in Christian lands, there were a number who, despite their overwhelmingly negative experience of Christianity, recognized a particular, special relationship with Christianity, born out of history and faith.

Rabbi Moses Rivkes, author of a major commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, the code of Jewish law, was one of them. He writes of the obligation of Jews to show moral responsibility towards Christians who “believe in the Creator, the Exodus, the Revelation at Sinai and whose whole intent is to serve their Maker.” Herein is the root of our special relationship which is affirmed by Christianity’s view of itself, in Paul’s metaphor, as being grafted onto the original olive tree.

Christianity’s self-understanding is uniquely bound up with Jewish history and belief, despite our fundamental differences. We can of course continue to deny each other; but if Judaism teaches that our obligation is to testify to God’s presence and sanctify his name in the world, and if we acknowledge that Christianity shares with us values rooted in a history and revelation, then we have an obligation to work together as far as all that binds us together is concerned. That in turn demands an even greater mutual understanding.

As already indicated, inter-faith relations in general and Jewish-Christian relations especially face particular difficulty in Israel. The reasons behind this are not hard to discern. Inter-faith dialogue is a concept born out of pluralistic perceptions and experience. Most affirming Moslems, Christians and Jews who live here believe that they are exclusive recipients of divine truth, or the true bearers of an exclusive secular truth, and thus see little or no reason to dialogue with those who are viewed as walking in greater or lesser darkness.

Moreover, as far as most Israeli Jews are concerned, the vast and overwhelming majority of them have never met a modern Christian. If they meet one of the

thousands of local Christian Israelis, they meet them as part of the Arab population as a whole, for better or worse. Even when they travel abroad, they overwhelmingly encounter non-Jews as just that – non-Jews in a secular context. Rarely do they meet and converse seriously with a modern Christian.

As a result, the image of a Christian and of Christianity is, for the vast majority of Israelis, one that is taken from the tragic past and interpolated into the present. Furthermore, for Jews who came from Islamic lands the antipathetic image of Christians comes through a “double negative,” that is, of the Islamic as well as Jewish experience.

Accordingly, if we were to imagine a sweet, naïve Western Christian, who would come up to a typical Israeli Jew on the street and say to him, “Hi, I’m a Christian, how do you feel about that?” If he were honest, he would probably answer, “Well, to tell you the truth, I feel rather uncomfortable about that, as a Christian, to me, is someone who wants at best to ‘steal my soul,’ if not to actually wish me physical harm!!”

That perception, it may be said, was not an inaccurate reflection of the tragic past, but as I have indicated, for most Israelis it continues to reflect on the present.

As a result however of that past reality, throughout the course of most Jewish history the acceptance of Christian beliefs by Jews was seen in itself as an act of betrayal of the community, and continues to be seen as such by most Israeli Jews, even amongst those who call themselves “secular.”

It is not my wish here to debate the legitimacy or otherwise of such perception, but rather to underline the socio-cultural reality in which we function in Israel – one which poses, I believe, a special challenge to the special relationship between Christians and Jews, in Israel in particular, and between Evangelical Christians and Religious Zionist Jews especially.

Taking my cue from Rabbi Moshe Rivkes, let me reiterate the special relationship between Christians and Jews as contained in the common belief in the Creator and Guide of the Universe, whose presence and word are revealed in the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament.

In theory, the more these Scriptures are taken seriously and faithfully, the more they should link those who share them together. Of course, part of the problem lies precisely in differing interpretation of those texts and of the expectations contained in them. Nevertheless, there is enough within them to serve as a unique basis especially for those Christians and Jews who see the promise of Scripture as unfolding in modern human history and in this land, no matter how conditionally or inadequately.

If this potentially most special relationship is not developing as it could, it has as much, or more, to do with history than theology. I believe that it has to do primarily with that aforementioned predominant Jewish view of Christianity. Now as far as Evangelicals are concerned, the perception of hostility might be misplaced, but that may well not be the case as regards their proselytizing intention.

For as long as the wounds of Jewish history are still open and unhealed – and that means for a generation or two *after* Israel enters an era in which she is free from external threat to her very existence – proselytization will continue to be perceived and felt by the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews, “secular” as well as “religious,” as an act that threatens the integrity and thus the future of the Jewish people. As a result, the very focus of Evangelical faith and perhaps even of duty, threatens the development of the potentially unique relationship between them and Jews.

Therefore, I believe that whether Evangelicals in Israel are willing to acknowledge this or not, they are faced (especially as a minority in this predominantly Jewish State) with alternatives which are mutually exclusive. One choice is to develop a special relationship with their Jewish brethren on a basis not only of mutual respect, but of joint study and dialogue, to understand the common and differing perspectives of what we share. The other alternative is to seek to persuade Jews of “the error of their ways” in order to affirm that which Jewish society (at least for the time being) sees as an act of betrayal.

I am not suggesting that Evangelicals need to “hide” their beliefs – not at all. I strongly deplore any attempt to muzzle anyone from expressing their religious views freely. I am suggesting however, that they voluntarily “suspend” active proselytizing attempts – their perfectly legal right to solicit Jews with a view to persuading the latter to share their beliefs.

In order to clarify the rather fine distinction that I am making here, let me refer to the extreme situation at present in Israel that is maintained by the Mormons at the Jerusalem Center of Brigham Young University (BYU). In order to placate ultra-Orthodox opposition, the authorities of BYU agreed to require staff and students coming to the Jerusalem Center to sign a pledge promising not to engage in proselytization while they are in the country (incidentally, Mormons who visit Muslim countries that have made similar demands, e.g. Saudi Arabia, do the same). However, I believe that they take this pledge to a ridiculous and inappropriate degree. Accordingly, if any local approaches a student or staff person from the BYU Jerusalem Center and asks them, for example, even a most neutral question like “How many Mormons are there in the world?” they will receive the reply “I’m sorry, but I’ve signed a pledge not to discuss my religion while I’m here!”

Now I do not consider such extreme self-imposed restrictions necessary or even desirable, and this is not what I am asking of Evangelicals or those who describe themselves as Messianic Jews or Hebrew Christians.

However there *is* a difference (it may seem to be very slight, but I believe that, in the Israeli context in particular, it is a very profound difference) between answering a question and even “testifying” to one’s faith in the course of conversation freely initiated by both sides on the one hand, and knocking on people’s doors, approaching them in the street, or even sending them material through the postal services, on the other.

I believe that if Evangelicals (as well as Jews who share their beliefs) were to eschew these latter activities, the way would be open for the potentially unique relationship between them and Jews to flourish. Perhaps they cannot in good faith bring themselves to do so. If they can't, however, then the "special relationship" will only remain and probably intensify as one of "special conflict," which I believe harms not only relations between Evangelicals and Jews but also the broader Jewish-Christian relationship, and thus damages Israeli society as a whole.