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Theological challenges in contemporary Catholic-Jewish dialogue

RABBI DAVID ROSEN WITH THE POPE



Interview with Rabbi David Rosen, Director of the Department for Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee

LISA PALMIERI-BILLIG
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Rabbi **David Rosen**, who is Director of the Department for Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee and Honorary Advisor on Interfaith Relations to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (among many other titles of honour and responsibility cf: www.rabbidavidrosen.net) made

news last October when he addressed the Vatican's Synod of Middle East Catholic Bishops as the sole representative of both Israeli and diaspora Jewry. His message of realism and hope springs from intimate knowledge and experience of the Middle East reality and the essential issues of Christian-Jewish relations.

Spurred by Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini's recent reply to a reader's question regarding psalm 137 (June 26, "Corriere della Sera") we asked Rabbi Rosen to clarify for "Vatican Insider" some hidden keys to the interpretation of difficult scriptural passages whose literal readings still today lead to a resurrection of ancient anti-Judaic stereotypes and to a false opposition between the so-called "Old Testament God of the Law" (or worse, "of Vengeance") and the "New Testament God of Love".

"One of the most relevant proposals for overcoming such misunderstandings" said Rabbi Rosen, "is contained within 'Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate No.4', issued in 1974. It states that Catholics '...must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience', and recommends their acquiring knowledge of 'the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism' – in other words, of living, contemporary Judaism."

Rabbi Rosen feels that if Christians and Jews, reciprocally, applied this principle more widely to the "joint Biblical studies" repeatedly recommended by the Vatican, we would discover many more contiguities in our scriptural interpretations.

Psalm 137 is a typical example of these difficulties. It is a poem of mourning expressing the anguish of the Israelites during their Babylonian exile and their longing for Jerusalem (Zion). While the poem is deeply moving, its final verses, if taken literally, would be terrifying.

- 1 *By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat down, yea, we wept,
when we remembered Zion.*
- 2 *We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.*
- 3 *For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song,
and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying
Sing us one of the songs of Zion.*
- 4 *How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?*
- 5 *If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,*
- 6 *let my right hand forget her cunning.*
- 7 *If I do not remember thee,
let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth;
if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.*
- 8 *Remember O LORD. The children of Edom
in the day of Jerusalem;
who said, Rase it, rase it,
even to the foundation thereof.*
- 9 *O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed,
happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us,*
- 10 *Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth
Thy little ones against the stones.*

Translation -- King James version

Cardinal Martini writes, *"This beautiful psalm...expresses the exasperation of a people reduced to slavery, the explosion of an oppressed mankind's rage, full of longing for freedom and their trodden identity."*

Lines 7 – 9, he says, were *"reinterpreted by Christian tradition. Babylon becomes the symbol of sin. St. Augustine says, 'Who are the children of Babylon? - /They are/ the evil, nascent thoughts.... While they are still small, hurl them against the rock that is Christ'...."*

Cardinal Martini assures his readers that he is citing this example just *"to erase all doubts that this 'beatitude' might have even the faintest resemblance to the Beatitudes of the New Testament."*

It should be noted that Cardinal Martini is well known to be a great friend of the Jewish people and passionate believer in the importance of Christian-Jewish understanding. Moreover he is the first ever Cardinal to have published a book in Hebrew for a modern Israeli audience – and for which he invited Rabbi Rosen to write the introduction.

However, people may mistakenly conclude from his abovementioned comment that only Christianity interprets Biblical text in keeping with a moral teleology and may be unaware that Judaism does the same.

Rabbi Rosen explains, *"This psalm is usually recited by Jews before grace after meals on weekdays but only up to verse 7. The last two verses are omitted. It is recited on weekdays because the bitterness of exile is recalled. On Shabbat and holidays we recite Psalm 126 ("When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion/ We were like those who dreamed./Our mouths were filled with laughter./Our tongues with songs of joy....") expressing joyous anticipation for God's restoration of our people to our ancient homeland.*

“Verses 8 and 9 of psalm 137, which we recognize as expressing rage and deep pain, are intentionally omitted” says Rabbi Rosen, “not because of self-censorship and fear of offending the Babylonians (who no longer exist) but because our purpose is to transmit Judaism’s sublime ethics, teaching Jews to emulate God’s key Divine Attributes identified as Justice and Mercy.”

“Is this typical for the interpretation of those troublesome sections of the Jewish Bible that express violence?” we asked.

“It must be understood first of all, that Judaism is not fundamentalist. No Jewish person, not even a child, understands the Biblical anthropomorphic imagery of God literally, i.e. God ‘says’, ‘comes down’, ‘goes up’, etc. Such language is but a tool to understand that which is beyond human comprehension.

“Moreover, Jewish tradition understands the written text only through the interpretation contained in the Oral Tradition, without which often Biblical texts cannot be properly understood.

“Sometimes the text seems written in shorthand, for example the injunction to ‘keep the Sabbath Holy’. We need the oral tradition to tell us what this means.

“The great Jewish medieval philosopher, Moses Maimonides, was most radical and categorical in asserting that certain passages in the Bible are metaphors for communicating an ethical and moral message.

“Without resorting to metaphors, many sections of the Torah appear irrational if not worse, such as a talking snake in the book of Genesis and a talking donkey in the book of Numbers! Maimonides not only affirms that these are images (and not to be taken literally), but he also provides (in keeping with the sages of the Talmud) moralistic interpretations of ‘problematic’ texts in keeping with the highest Jewish ethical ideals. Such interpretation exists throughout the Jewish tradition.

“So regarding the Wars described in the Pentateuch, Maimonides states categorically (again based on the Talmud), that the Israelites were obliged to search for peaceful solutions to avoid conflict as a first and preferred alternative, and only turned to War as a last resort when their opponents refused such offers.”

The cruel sections of the Passover-Exodus story, the Ten Plagues that seem to collectively punish the Egyptian people --- how do we interpret all this?

“The story of Pharaoh and Egypt is a simple narrative of the consequences of stubborn disobedience towards God. In effect, the narrative tells us, ‘You have the free choice of listening or not listening to Divine moral injunctions. However, if you defy Divine law, there will be dire consequences, just as if you defy the laws of nature.

“In effect the story is also one of a ‘showdown’ between ethical monotheism and immoral zoomorphic idolatry, with the triumph of the former and the latter suffering the consequences of immoral behaviour.”

What about innocent Egyptian people, why did they have to suffer as well?

“On the basis of the Biblical text, Jewish tradition indicates that those who listened to and did not defy the Word of God but took precautions as advised, did not suffer the consequences.”

How does Jewish tradition explain the death of the first born in Egyptian households?

“In the ancient Near East the idea of the first born serving in a ‘priestly role’ was well known. Therefore a number of commentators explain that the ‘first born’ referred to in the narrative, were the idolatrous priestly caste that enforced the immoral idolatrous system. Accordingly, the ‘first born’ were not innocent babies, but rather adults who were the heads of the Egyptian elite, oppressing the vulnerable population (and specifically, the Hebrews.)”

Has joint textual research between Catholic and Jewish leaders, and a search for common values made headway in recent years?

“A bi-lateral Commission between the Vatican and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel was established as a result of John Paul II’s historic visit to Israel, and meets every year alternating between Rome and Jerusalem.

“The purpose of the meetings is the interpretation of religious values in the light of common texts. Issues that have been explored include the sanctity and preservation of human life, religious education in secular society, the beginning and the end of life, environment and ecology, the family, relations between religion and the State. We cast different religious perspectives on shared texts.

“These meetings are highly valued on both sides, and were mentioned by Benedict XVI both during his visit to Israel, and to the Main Synagogue of Rome. Their significance lies in a shift of focus from overcoming a difficult past to a commitment to our joint vision of the future – how we as Christians and Jews should work together to create a better world.”

The International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee composed of the Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with Jews and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC – representing the world’s major Jewish organizations) has been meeting regularly since the late 1960’s. Apart from the friendships that have grown, the easier, more direct communication between Catholics and Jews on issues of common concern and the interreligious training of Catholic and Jewish Youth leaders, what are some of the most important joint projects for social action?

“Particularly notable in recent years in our meetings in Argentina and in South Africa, were joint Vatican – IJCIC initiatives for creating Microcredit opportunities to combat the Argentinian economic crisis, and in bringing together Catholic and Jewish philanthropies for a common effort in Health Care in particular response to the AIDS pandemic.”