

Reflections on the recent Orthodox Jewish Statements on Jewish-Catholic Relations

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On August 31 2017, a document was presented to Pope Francis by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Conference of European Rabbis and the Rabbinical Council of America, entitled “Between Jerusalem and Rome : the shared universal and the respected particular reflections on 50 years of Nostra Aetate”.

I have been asked to reflect on this document, but before addressing its content let me acknowledge that the fact of its formulation and presentation was truly historic.

In 2002 a first ever Jewish declaration responding to the changes in the Christian world relating to Jews and Judaism was issued. Titled Dabru Emet (Speak the Truth), it affirmed both fundamental shared beliefs and values as well as what it called “the humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians (that) will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture”. In addition to rejecting the idea that Nazism was related to Christianity, it called on Jews and Christians to work together for Justice and Peace. However while it was signed by almost two hundred and fifty rabbis and scholars, they were almost entirely from the non-Orthodox Jewish world, from the Reform and Conservative movements.

In contrast “Between Jerusalem and Rome” was the first ever official document issued by institutional Jewish Orthodoxy. It was of course issued as an official response to the Catholic Church, pursuant to the 50th anniversary of Nostra Aetate. However it might not have been forthcoming had there not been an earlier document issued by a few score Orthodox rabbis on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Nostra Aetate titled “To do the will of our Father in Heaven”. I think it fair to say that the latter galvanized the formulation and issuing of “Between Jerusalem and Rome” and of course that was a significant contribution in and of itself.

There is not much difference in substance between the two documents which not only express recognition and appreciation of the blessed transformation in the Catholic Church’s approach towards Jews, Judaism and Israel; but also affirms the partnership and mutual responsibility of the two Faith communities to provide a religio-ethical vision and example for contemporary society. Indeed in addressing this, the earlier document specifically refers to the statement issued at our own Bilateral Commission meeting, the fourth of these, held at Grottaferrata in 2004, that “we are no longer enemies, but unequivocal partners in articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of humanity”.

Perhaps the only real distinction is in some of the language used in this regard, where the earlier document refers to “a common covenantal mission”.

Both texts seek to eschew any syncretism and emphasize the importance of respecting the fundamental differences that separate the Church and the Jewish community. As opposed to the earlier document, “Between Jerusalem and Rome” makes more substantial effort to record the sad history of the past and to summarize the recent transformation up until today, inter alia quoting from both the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews’ document “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” issued on the 50th anniversary of Nostra Aetate, and Pope Francis’ words in “Evangelii Gaudium”.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of the Jewish statements, allow me also to put them in a broader, albeit more recent, perspective.

The historically negative Jewish view of Christianity was less to do with theology and far more with what Jews experienced in the name of Christianity. Nevertheless, the latter was still predominantly viewed by rabbinic authorities if not as idolatrous, at best as a flawed monotheism (even if there was an acknowledgement of the positive aspects of Christian religious-ethical teaching.)

There were notable leading rabbinic exceptions in the Middle Ages, many of whom are referred to in the two documents, who viewed Christianity in a positive light and who serve as important references for today’s Orthodox Jewish advocates on behalf of positive engagement with Christianity. Yet it would be disingenuous to describe these positions as predominant.

The modern era of enlightenment and emancipation led to the emergence of new forms of Judaism and brought Jews increasingly into the social mainstream leading to the growing reevaluation of the Jewish-Christian relationship. Accordingly the latter came overwhelmingly from the new liberal streams of Judaism. The fact that Orthodox Judaism saw these alternative Jewish movements themselves as a threat if not worse, in itself reinforced Orthodox Jewish suspicion of such engagement with Christianity.

The tragedy of the Shoah led to both a revision and a reinforcement of attitudes towards Jewish-Christian relations. As hinted at in “Between Jerusalem and Rome”, the fact that the Shoah took place overwhelmingly in ostensibly Christian lands perpetrated by baptized Christians, reinforced the perception with the Jewish community – especially within the Orthodox community – that this was simply the ultimate culmination of the tragic Jewish experience in Christendom down the ages.

But the Shoah of course served as a primary impetus for many Christians to work to purify their community of the poison of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. As we know, the Shoah had a profound impact on St. John XXIII acknowledged as a great hero of that tragic period, and this played a critical role in leading to the promulgation of Nostra Aetate in 1965 and the “Copernican revolution” in Christian teaching regarding Jews, Judaism and Israel, facilitating a genuine desire to engage Jewry in a serious respectful dialogue.

The Shoah also served as a major impulse for many Jews to reach out to Christian counterparts, precisely in order to protect their communities from such terrible 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 but in his later life identified increasingly with Orthodoxy. 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 and responsibility (even if denied for most of its history) especially in relation to the security and flourishing of 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 had been less open to and influenced by the winds of modernity.

Notable in this regard was the Orthodox rabbi and philosopher 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. His position therefore is that 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 Jewish-Christian cooperation let alone dialogue can be contemplated.

While Berkowitz’s view is articulated harshly, it is not eccentric in Orthodox Jewish circles and is probably normative within haredi ultra-Orthodoxy if not beyond. Especially as haredi society reflects a reactionary withdrawal from the modern world and is thus isolationist by definition, the impact of the tragic historical experience under Christendom and its trauma is all the more prevalent (even unconsciously.)

“Between Jerusalem and Rome” notes the initial skepticism in Jewish circles regarding the changes ushered in by *Nostra Aetate*. In fact, a suspicion of Christianity and the intentions of the Church within Jewish society persists, especially where Jews do not enjoy any real encounter with contemporary Christians, where it is compounded by a residual pre-modern view of Christianity as quasi-idolatrous and where there is widespread ignorance of and/or disinterest in the extensive positive rabbinic views of Christianity. In addition, interreligious dialogue has actually been seen in more committed Jewish circles, as a threat to the integrity of Jewish faithfulness and an encouragement to assimilation and loss of Jewish particularity.

This of course implies that Jews are lacking in the passion and commitment to engage with others and are in need of isolation for their survival. However the self-indictment in this position is generally lost on those who advocate such insularity.

Interestingly this often seems to be more of a preoccupation among a younger generation of Orthodox rabbis. Modern Orthodox leadership in post-war Europe was generally more open to such engagement, as reflected in persons like Chief Rabbis Hertz of Britain, Kaplan of France, and Toaff of Rome for example, who 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 (Tradition, Vol.6 No.2)

While advocating cooperation with Christians on matters of shared social and ethical concern and advocacy, he suggested that any theological dialogue that relates to the “inner life” of faith affirmation is inappropriate if not in effect unfeasible. Because the Jewish community must always be mindful of the mystery of the uniqueness of its being, he suggested that it should avoid exposing the inner life of its faith to interreligious dialogue.

There has been much debate, commentary and critique on Soloveitchik’s position, his motives and goals; and whether his comments were absolute or relative to time, place and person, especially as he himself apparently *did* participate in theological discussions with Christians. Nevertheless, an official position of maintaining a distinction between theological dialogue (to be avoided) and shared consultations and collaboration on social and ethical matters (viewed as desirable), is held by most of mainstream Orthodox Jewry in the US and has had some impact in Israel and further abroad.

In the 1970s, in response to the developments following the promulgation of Nostra Aetate, a Jewish roof body was established as the official Jewish interlocutor for the Holy See’s newly established Commission for Religious Relations with the Jewish People.

Precisely because of the abovementioned distinction between theological dialogue and other kinds of interreligious relations (quite artificial in my opinion); and in order to include the US Orthodox rabbinic and lay organizations; this body was given the name the “International Jewish Committee for Interreligious **Consultations**”, and not “*Dialogue*”.

Accordingly the very fact that “Between Jerusalem and Rome” refers to the importance of “our dialogue” with the Catholic Church is of great significance. The use of the word dialogue might not have been so purposefully conscious; but then even it was used as a matter of course, that itself is significant too and shows how far the official Orthodox bodies have come as well, even if there is still a way to go.

While the major imperative for Jewish participants in the Jewish-Christian encounter has been and continues to be precisely the need to combat anti-Semitism and threats to Jewish security and wellbeing ; many have been motivated by the recognition of fundamental shared religio-ethical values. Indeed it is argued that if we are truly committed to the Biblical universal principles of love and justice, righteousness and equity, the sanctity of life and family, the pursuit of peace, human wellbeing and flourishing; then we surely have an obligation to work together with those that share these values, to be greater than the sum of our different parts.

Not to do so, it is claimed, would in fact be a betrayal of those values we claim to espouse.

Moreover among those earlier Jewish religious authorities who expressed a positive view of Christianity, the latter's belief in the Creator and Guide of the Universe as well as the acceptance of the Hebrew Scriptures as Divine revelation, are seen as demanding special mutual responsibility. "Between Jerusalem and Rome" refers among others to Rabbi Moses Rivkes, the 17th century author of the Be'er HaGoleh commentary on the Code of Jewish Law. Let me quote him accordingly: "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. We are obliged to save them from danger and commanded to pray for their welfare." (Chosen Mishpat, sect. 425)

Contained in this comment is a further religious imperative for advancing Christian-Jewish relations. 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 believing Jews towards those who also affirm that text and its teachings as Divine, making Jews and Christians partners in the pursuit of the Universal Kingdom of Heaven on earth in keeping with that Biblical vision.

Indeed the fact that all too often the behavior of so-called Christians towards Jews made a mockery of the Christian gospel must not blind Jews 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.

As the sacred text that Jews affirm to be Divine revelation was officially embraced by Christianity and yet desecrated in its name, we Jews have a stake in Christian purification as it inevitably reflects on the embrace of that sacred text.

The radical conclusion of such an argument is that the promotion of a positive image true to Christianity's authentic message as a bearer of values of the Torah, is directly relevant to the Jewish holy task of "*Kiddush HaShem*", sanctifying God's Name in the world.

Yet one of the hurdles for Christian-Jewish relations is precisely the subject of mission.

While the Church makes a distinction between witness and proselytization, this is often lost on the Jewish community.

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.

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 fully respects the freedom of conscience of people of other faiths.

Of particular relevance to Jewish reservations and suspicions of Christian intent, was the fact that the movement for the return of the Jewish people to establish sovereign national life in its historical homeland known as Zionism, had been opposed by the Church on theological grounds. This opposition continued even after the establishment of the State of Israel, while the latter took on even greater significance and implications for Jews precisely in the wake of the Shoah.

While *Nostra Aetate* dismissed any theological grounds for this opposition and ushered in a new era in Catholic-Jewish relations, the absence of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel served to maintain Jewish doubts as to the full sincerity of this transformation.

Indeed it took time for the understanding of the inextricable relationship between the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, as something intrinsic to Jewry's original and ongoing identity, to substantially penetrate Christian consciousness.

The Jewish expectation in this regard was well articulated by Rabbi Henry Siegman, then the director of the Synagogue Council of America:- "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."

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel was therefore seen as much more than a secular diplomatic achievement. Indeed the far wider significance is itself acknowledged in the preamble to the concordat signed by the two known as *The Fundamental Agreement*.

From a Jewish perspective, this was not only the ultimate proof that the Church no longer had a problem with the idea of Jewish sovereignty in its ancestral homeland, it further indicated a genuine respect for the integrity of the Jewish People according to its own self-definition.

St. John Paul II's papacy was remarkable for Catholic-Jewish relations in many ways, as it took the revolution ushered in by St. John XXIII to new heights. Moreover Karol Wojtyła's understanding of the power of contemporary media and the potential of dramatic gestures played a key part in this process – in particular, his visits to the Great Synagogue in Rome in 1986, and to Israel in the year 2000 (facilitated inter alia by the establishment of those full bilateral diplomatic relations).

The impact of the latter was dramatic. The Christian presence in Israel is less than two per cent. It is true that more Israelis today meet Christians than ever before through foreign workers - especially Philippino care givers. Nevertheless, there is minimal awareness of the latter's Christian identity. And when Israelis travel abroad, they generally meet non-Jews as non-Jews, not as modern Christians. Accordingly for most Israeli Jews - especially among the more religiously observant - the image of Christianity is overwhelmingly still taken from the tragic past.

However to see the most visible head of the Christian world - as the vast majority did on television when John Paul II visited the country - at Yad Vashem in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering ; to learn of how he had saved Jews as a novice and then as a prelate instructed Catholic families who had saved Jewish children and brought them up as Catholic, to return them to their natural Jewish parents ; to see the Pope at the Western Wall paying respect to Jewish tradition and placing there the text asking Divine forgiveness for the sins committed by Christian down the ages against Jews (a part of the liturgy of repentance that he had conducted weeks earlier at St. Peter's); were stunning revelations for much of Israeli society.

Another most significant outcome of that pilgrimage came from the visit of the Pope to Hechal Shlomo to meet with the Chief Rabbis of Israel and members the Chief Rabbinate Council, and as a result of that Papal initiative, we are blessed with this permanent bilateral commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry.

For our late lamented first Jewish Chair of our bilateral Commission, Rabbi She'ar Yashuv Cohen, the transformation in the Catholic Church's approach towards Jews Judaism and Israel, and indeed our Commission itself, were/are an indication of the new era of history with which the Jewish People and humanity as a whole have entered – a period of the pending and ultimate Divine Redemption, the Messianic Era itself.

Of course, "Between Jerusalem and Rome" does not go that far. Nevertheless, its acknowledgement and celebration of a unique partnership for the benefit of humanity as a whole, is a remarkable milestone on the road of Orthodox Jewish theological reciprocity.

We cannot deny that negative attitudes towards Christianity persist for the earlier mentioned reasons, including the fear that interreligious engagement may lead to a weakening of Jewish identity. Moreover for as long as anti-Semitism continues to rear its ugly head; and for as long as Israel's physical and political survival and wellbeing are threatened (or at least perceived as threatened), these fears will often prevent an openness to recognizing let alone embracing the new reality of Christian-Jewish relations.

Notwithstanding, "Between Jerusalem and Rome" highlights the new era of normative Orthodox Jewish engagement with the Christian world reflected not least of all in this bilateral commission itself, in which there is a rapidly growing appreciation of the dramatic change that has taken place with in Christianity in relation to Jewry, Judaism and Israel; of the strategic importance of this relationship for the Jewish People and the Jewish state; and even of the theological as well as moral imperatives for deepening this mutual relationship to work together for the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

