

Jewish Reflection on
“The Gifts & the Calling of God are Irrevocable”

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I thank Father Scott Lewis of Regis College for hosting this evening; Sister Lucy Thorson of Scarboro Missions for conceiving this program and inviting us to participate; Sister/Professor Eileen Schuller who has already taught me a great deal through her close reading of the document we are discussing tonight; and all of you for joining us,

Professor Judah Goldin, a Rabbi and scholar of midrash, once observed, “Text and experience are reciprocally enlightening.” So, before studying the text of “Reflections,” let me begin with a vignette from my youth in Chicago. I always carried my books so that the Hebrew side would not be visible. I knew that I was a target and didn’t want to be more obvious. In grade 8, walking from school to the subway station, I was pursued by some older youth who came out of Our Lady of Mt Carmel church on Belmont Avenue and ran after me. No one told me that they were motivated by Church teachings, but I certainly associated the attack with the Church.

In the 21st century, seventy years following the conclusion of WW II, Jews are again a target in Europe and other regions. Although these attacks are not part of an official state policy of genocide, they do raise many concerns about the Jewish future. Schoolchildren, teachers, people at prayer and grocery shoppers have been attacked in Toulouse, Marseille and Paris, Mumbai and Constantinople. It is important to note that these contemporary attacks were not perpetrated by Christians.

We also know that Christians did not unleash the technology of terror associated with the Holocaust that murdered by bullets, starvation and gas. But Nostre Aetate recognised that the Church, through its historic teaching of contempt, did lay the groundwork for such evil. Raul Hilberg pointed out that the Nazis built upon earlier expressions of restriction and hatred, “from the earliest days... the missionaries of Christianity had said, in effect, to the Jews, ‘You may not live among us as Jews.’ The secular rulers who followed them from the late Middle Ages had then decided ‘You may not live among us.’ And the Nazis finally decreed, ‘You may not live.’”

It should be noted that there were righteous Gentiles who intervened and sought to save Jews. During the years of Shoah, a Vatican diplomat based in Turkey, Greece and France, saved numerous Jews. Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli issued false baptismal certificates to Jewish children as one of his methods to save them from deportation and death.

In 1960, the former diplomat was by that time Pope John XXIII. He referenced his birth name, Giuseppe, and the Biblical narrative of the reunion of the children of Jacob, when he said to a delegation of visiting Jews, "I am your brother, Joseph." That same year, he met with the Jewish historian and Holocaust survivor, Jules Isaac, who shared with the Pope his documentation of *The teaching of contempt: Christian roots of anti-Semitism*. He subsequently met with my teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who urged him to condemn the charge of deicide as heresy or blasphemy.

Text and experience reinforced the Pope's determination to change the pattern of Catholic-Jewish relations and to "throw open the windows of the Church and let the fresh air of the Spirit blow through." Although he did not live to see the transformational document *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"), which rejected the charge that Jews were to blame for the death of Jesus, we recognise that the process Pope John XXIII initiated has led to a rejection of anti-Semitism and a validation of God's eternal covenant with the Jewish people.

Despite internal opposition, Pope Paul VI continued this new Spirit by releasing *Nostra Aetate* and, subsequently, by undertaking the first modern Papal pilgrimage to the Holy Land. After him, Pope John Paul II made an official visit to a synagogue, a pilgrimage to Auschwitz, established Vatican diplomatic relations with Israel, and paid the first modern papal visit to Israel. On that occasion, he placed into a crevice in the Western Wall a note with the following words: "God of our fathers, You chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the nations: we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant."

Pope Benedict XVI continued the theological reflections on the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people. He also enacted the theology by visiting synagogues in Cologne, NYC and Rome, as well as making pilgrimage to Israel. That good will has continued under Pope Francis whose history of positive relations with the Argentinian Jewish community prepared him for the possibility of his own pilgrimage to the Holy Land and the recent release by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews of a theological reflection based on Romans 11:29, "The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable."

Let me take you back over a half-century to Good Friday 1958. Following the Tridentine liturgy (going back to 1570), Catholics prayed:

Let us pray also for the faithless (*perfidious*) Jews that almighty God may remove the veil from their hearts, so that they too may acknowledge Jesus Christ our Lord. Almighty and eternal God, who does not exclude from thy mercy even Jewish faithlessness (*perfidy*), hear our prayers, which we offer for the blindness of that people; that acknowledging the light of thy truth, which is Christ, they may be delivered from their darkness...

The following year, on Good Friday 1959, Pope John XXIII interrupted the Service and directed that the word "faithless" (Latin: *perfidis*) be removed from the prayer for the conversion of the Jews and that the prayer to be repeated without that word.

Notwithstanding some controversy over subsequent versions permitted for use in an extraordinary Mass, the current English version reads:

Let us pray also for the Jewish people, to whom the Lord our God spoke first, that he may grant them to advance in love of his name and in faithfulness to his covenant. ... Almighty ever-living God, who bestowed your promises on Abraham and his descendants, hear graciously the prayers of your Church, that the people you first made your own may attain the fullness of redemption.

That liturgical revision must be seen as part of a lengthy process that began with paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate* which quotes Romans 11.29 that God "does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues."

For centuries, the Catholic Church and other Christian communities taught that the New Covenant" proclaimed by Jesus, offering salvation through Christ to those who believe in him, had replaced the old Jewish covenant offering redemption through Torah. Scholars call this "replacement theology,"

A shift from the historic teaching of supersessionism, meaning the New Covenant superseded the old, to one that accepts God's "everlasting" promise given to Abraham in Genesis 17:7, began with *Nostra Aetate*. That development included the statement by Pope John Paul II in Mainz on 17 November 1980, that the Covenant of God and the Jewish people was "never revoked by God." Later, the Catechism of 1993 said simply, "The Old Covenant has never been revoked."

The Church has come to accept that God's covenant guarantees blessing and redemption for my people, the descendants of Abraham, and that through the Sinai covenant, Jews retain a living tradition through Torah and its commandments.

Notwithstanding the growing rapprochement, differences remain. In a long-standing literary dialogue with Rabbi Jacob Neusner, Pope Benedict XVI writes, "The issue that is really at the heart of the debate is thus finally laid bare. Jesus understands himself as the Torah "as the word of God in person." Israel is expressed as a family structure centred on observance of the Torah, while Jesus announced that everything ought to be centred on him: "This restructuring of the social order finds its basis and its justification in Jesus' claim that he, with his community of disciples, forms the origin and center of a new Israel."

While this difference is acknowledged in the new document, it tries to bridge that gap. These reflections are one side of an extended theological debate within the Church about how to accept the eternity of God's love for and fidelity to a particular people along with its belief that Jesus is at the core of all salvation. The implication is that Jews, unlike other

non-Christians, can attain personal salvation without believing in Jesus. Yet that possibility seems to undercut the universal and exclusive path to salvation through Christ.

A significant part of this new document seeks to square the circle, acknowledging, "That Jews are participants in God's salvation is unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery" (36). One might view this Reflection as a parve text, because it seems to merely review and recapitulate existing Church theology, but it is more properly seen as a polemical document, indicative of a still unresolved issue and pointing to one side of an inner conflict within the Church.

My friend and teacher, Rabbi David Rosen, the international director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, was at the side of Cardinal Kurt Koch and Father Norbert Hofmann when the new statement was issued. This indicates another important development. The presence of Rabbi Rosen and the use of rabbinic sources (however interpreted) in the document indicates the extent to which the Church "seeks to reflect a sincere comprehension of Jewish self-understanding." The Church has come to see Judaism as a living faith and recognises the place of Torah in the life of Jews.

To move away from replacement theology is only one aspect of the theological revolution initiated by *Nostra Aetate*. The new statement - "the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews" (40) - rejects official Catholic evangelisation of Jews. Yet the document does allow for individual witness. Then it clearly minimizes such activity because "Jews are bearers of God's Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah." The back and forth weave is indicative of the challenge presented by this new theological stance.

Nostra Aetate not only reflects Christian awareness of the Shoah. I believe that the change in Church doctrine also arose from the reality of the State of Israel and the restoration of Jewish sovereignty. Paragraph 4 swept away the assertion that Jewish exile from the land was a punishment for the sin of the crucifixion and that Jewry must remain dispossessed from the Land of Promise. Pope John XXIII died before normal diplomatic relations could be established, but that did eventually occur - made theologically possible by *Nostra Aetate*. I see the Vatican as situated between the pro-Zionist evangelical Christians and the hostile Protestants of the World Council of Churches.

Yet it is notable that there is no direct reference to the State of Israel or to the role that Zionism has played for contemporary Jewry. What might this "negative theology" mean? The involvement of the Vatican Secretariat of State may have played a role. The Vatican is concerned about its Palestinian adherents and the many Catholics in Arab lands. But the absence of any reference to Zionism and the Jewish State must also be seen as another example of the challenge to Catholic faith represented by the continued vitality of the Jewish people.

It is not only the Church that is conflicted. While most Jews are aware that Vatican II removed the accusation of deicide, few have heard about all the other reforms in Catholic teaching over the past 50 years. Church leaders occasionally note that Jewish students do not learn anything about Catholicism except expulsion, conversion and inquisition. Jewish leaders and institutions have not sufficiently educated our people about these developments. I believe that this is because of our continued desire to protect ourselves from any Christian overtures.

There have been two major statements by Jews comparable to the recently released document. *Dabru Emet* ("Speak the Truth") is a statement by more than 170 Jewish scholars issued in September 2000. On December 3, 2015, just a few days prior to the release of the Vatican reflections, Orthodox rabbis signed and released "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians." I shall turn to these documents to briefly explore how Jews have begun to perceive the Church in light of the past fifty years of transformative dialogue.

Debra Emet takes note of changes in Christian theological developments and states, *We believe these changes merit a thoughtful Jewish response. We believe it is time for Jews to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity. As a first step, we offer eight brief statements about how Jews and Christians may relate to one another.*

This statement indicates that in light of *Nostra Aetate*, Jews are now able to reflect and reframe what Judaic teaching might say about Christianity. Historically, we viewed Christianity as an oppressive dominant force which we engaged with through disputation. In the modern world, we entered into dialogue primarily to ensure our safety and to establish a place for ourselves in the larger society. This document will suggest that the dialogue has brought us to a new place in the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

Dabru Emet continues:

Jews and Christians worship the same God. ... While Christian worship is not a viable religious choice for Jews, as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.

Although Jews in Muslim countries generally adopted the perspective that Christianity had multiple deities and prayed to images, Jews from Christian lands had a much more favourable perspective about Christian belief and behaviour. Maimonides, who differentiated between Islam and Christianity, still declared that both religions had spread Biblical beliefs through the world. Rabbi Menahem Meiri of Provence declared that Christians share a faith in the God of Creation. Rabbi Isaac Arama of Spain wrote of the respect that Christian philosophers had for traditional theology. Rashi and the school of Tosafists indicated that trade with Christians before and following their holy days - which might be prohibited if they were idolators - was permissible. This contemporary

acknowledgement by the signatories of *Dabru Emet* was intended to combat those in the Jewish community who still see Christianity as a form of polytheism.

The authors of *Dabru Emet* acknowledge that

Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book, the Bible (what Jews call "Tanakh" and Christians call the "Old Testament"). Turning to it for religious orientation, spiritual enrichment, and communal educationYet Jews and Christians interpret the Bible differently on many points. Such differences must always be respected.

While acknowledging that our hermeneutical lenses may differ, this document recognises that we seek spiritual succour from the same source.

One of the most significant spiritual developments for contemporary Jewish life has been the establishment of a political state where Jews can act out significant elements of our historic tradition. Here, *Dabru Emet* is actually issuing a call to Christians to recognise and respect the attraction of Jews to the Land of Promise.

Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel. ... Christians appreciate that Israel was promised and given to Jews as the physical center of the covenant between them and God. ...

Too often, we see liberal Christians recognise Judaism as a religion, but articulate difficulties with the idea of Jews as a people with interests, not simply moral claims. In contrast, conservative Christians often rejoice over Jewish sovereignty, but are challenged to accept Judaism as a living faith. This document is a call to recognise the realities of our physical and spiritual existence.

According to *Dabru Emet*, Jews and Christians can share an agenda of *hesed* and *mishpat*, compassion and justice, growing from the core belief that humans are created "in the Image of God."

Jews and Christians accept the moral principles of Torah [and] the inalienable sanctity and dignity of every human being. ...This shared moral emphasis can be the basis ... of a powerful witness...for improving the lives of our fellow human beings and for standing against the immoralities and idolatries that harm and degrade us. ...

This statement is similar to what the Church has articulated regarding the possibility of finding common cause to build a better world under the sovereignty of the Holy One and to stand together in opposition to a society that glorifies values alien to both faith traditions.

While recognising the historic teaching of contempt, *Dabru Emet* seeks to place the burden of responsibility for Nazi actions directly on the perpetrators.

Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon. Without the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews, Nazi ideology could not have taken hold nor could it have been carried out.... We recognise with gratitude those Christians who risked or sacrificed their lives to save Jews during the Nazi regime. With that in mind, we applaud those Christians who reject this teaching of contempt, and we do not blame them for the sins committed by their ancestors.

Hakarat hatov, acknowledgement and gratitude, is an important Jewish value. While the numbers of the the righteous were small, we appreciate the courage that altruistic behavior required.

As I noted earlier, there are significant differences between the religious pathways of Jews and Christians. Torah and *mitzvah* are the Jewish way. The life and teachings of Jesus are formative of the Christian tradition. As Dabru Emet puts it,

The humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture. Christians know and serve God through Jesus Christ and the Christian tradition. Jews know and serve God through Torah and the Jewish tradition. ... Neither Jew nor Christian should be pressed into affirming the teaching of the other community.

In this last line is a call to avoid evangelisation of the Jewish community.

Justifiably, Jews fear that an improved relationship with Christianity may lead to conversion. Dabru Emet seeks to assuage that anxiety:

A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice. An improved relationship will not accelerate the cultural and religious assimilation that Jews rightly fear. We respect Christianity as a faith that originated within Judaism and that still has significant contacts with it. We do not see it as an extension of Judaism.

The statement also stands firmly against the notion still articulated in the Vatican Reflections that Christianity is the universal fulfilment or extension of the covenant between God and the children of Abraham.

Finally, the fifteen year old statement calls for adherents of each faith tradition to find ways to work together and with other religious communities to realize a shared ultimate hope.

Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace. ... Although justice and peace are finally God's, our joint efforts, together with those of other faith communities, will help bring the kingdom of God for which we hope and long. ...

This messianic dream remains unrealised, yet ever nigh.

On December 3, 2015, just a few days prior to the release of the Vatican reflections, Orthodox rabbis signed and released "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians." This statement affirmed that

We seek to do the will of our Father in Heaven by accepting the hand offered to us by our Christian brothers and sisters. Jews and Christians must work together as partners to address the moral challenges of our era.

It goes on to state:

We recognize that since the Second Vatican Council the official teachings of the Catholic Church about Judaism have changed fundamentally and irrevocably.

This, of course, is similar to *Dabru Emet*, indicative of a growing consensus within the Jewish community.

Moreover - and this is the major element - these rabbis state “Christianity is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations.” Reflecting the theological work of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, one of the signatories, the statement observes that Jews and Christians are not combatants, but covenantal colleagues:

In separating Jews and Christians, God was not separating enemies but partners with significant theological differences, the rabbis wrote. Both Jews and Christians have a common covenantal mission to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty, so that all humanity will call on His name and abominations will be removed from the earth.

This articulation of a “common covenantal mission” has drawn much criticism from inside the observant Jewish community.

The Orthodox statement goes far beyond the strictures of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik that dialogue should not encompass theological subjects:

Now that the Catholic Church has acknowledged the eternal Covenant between Gd and Israel, we Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption, without any fear that this will be exploited for missionary purposes...We Jews and Christians have more in common than what divides us: the ethical monotheism of Abraham; the relationship with the One Creator of Heaven and Earth, Who loves and cares for all of us; Jewish Sacred Scriptures; a belief in a binding tradition; and the values of life, family, compassionate righteousness, justice, inalienable freedom, universal love and ultimate world peace.

Calling Christianity a partner for redemption is a far reaching affirmation of how far the relationship has come.

Still, the document makes clear that

Our partnership in no way minimizes the ongoing differences between the two communities and two religions. We believe that G-d employs many messengers to reveal His truth, while we affirm the fundamental ethical obligations that all people have before GdJews and Christians must offer models of service, unconditional love and holiness. We are all created in G-d’s Holy Image, and Jews and Christians will remain dedicated to the Covenant by playing an active role together in redeeming the world.

In its conclusion the Orthodox statement seeks to both acknowledge difference, accept the notion of multiple messengers and call for a joint effort to bring a messianic redemption.

These two Jewish statements, separated by fifteen years, are united by a recognition of commonalities amidst differences. They are not official statements by Judaism, because we have nothing comparable to the Vatican or the Pope. We can only depend on winning the hearts of those we teach. Still, these Jewish declarations reflect an awareness and appreciation of the changes in the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations since the brief document of *Nostra Aetate* was issued five decades ago.

This set of Reflections by the Catholic Church and these statements by different Jewish scholars are the fruit of many meetings and conversations. They derive from religious leaders engaged in real relations and deep dialogue. While not going as far as either party might desire of the other, these documents are reflective of significant advances from the past. Our goal should be to continue those advances by bringing these conversations to local parishes and *kehillot*-congregations.

My friend, Rabbi David Rosen is one of the most astute and resolute activists in this area. He signed the recent Orthodox statement and stood at the Vatican when Reflections was released. Observing that the Jewish approach has and is changing, Rabbi Rosen noted that the future agenda for Catholics involves a full consolidation of the accomplishments of the past five decades. He identified three specific goals:

- A hope that a Latin American Pope will stand against the pre-Conciliar attitudes still prevalent in South America;
- An expectation that the teaching of *Nostra Aetate* and of the subsequent Magisterium will become a core element for the formation of priests;
- The prospect that Catholics will be taught that Jesus, his followers and opponents were Jews and that the Church will continue to counter the historic charge of deicide.

These teachings have not yet become universal for the Church.

In contrast to my childhood experience, let me share with you another image. Last May I joined over seventy rabbis in a conference with Catholic laity, priests, bishops and cardinals in the Galilee. One evening, we marked the minor Jewish celebration of Lag b'Omer by singing and dancing together around a bonfire and in front of a statue of the late Pope John Paul II. At one point, I stood near an old rabbi, a Holocaust survivor, who wept saying, "I could never have imagined this."

In Mishnah Avot, Rabbi Tarfon taught, "The day is short and the work is great." Despite the complexities that are part of the contemporary Jewish-Catholic relationship, we should not lose perspective. We have come a long way. We have initiated joint efforts to face common social, scientific, and environmental challenges. We must stand together for the sanctity of life and against its dehumanisation. Let us build upon our successes so that we can share and be guided by the vision of Isaiah the prophet:

It shall come to pass in the end of days that the mountain of the house of the Eternal shall be established at the top of the mountains and be exalted above the hills, and the nations shall flow unto it . . . and many peoples shall go and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Eternal to the house of the God of Jacob. God will teach us His ways and we will walk in His paths. (Isaiah 2:23).

Come, let us walk together.