

**Interreligious Dialogue and the Jewish-Christian Dialogue
Rome, January 17 2007**

Rabbi David Rosen

"Then those who revered God spoke with one another and God listened and heard and a book of remembrance was written down before Him of those who revere the Lord and respect His Name." (Malachi 3 v.16)

This remarkable verse from the prophet Malachi might be prescribed as the Biblical text of advocacy for interreligious dialogue. If we note the earlier statement by the prophet Malachi (1 v.11) "From sunrise to its setting my Name is great among the gentiles", then we may affirm that the dialogue that Malachi refers to is the dialogue of believers from among all nations. Malachi presents such dialogue as something of note and great satisfaction to the Almighty as an act of devotion to Him! This is a fascinating and important insight.

There are many good reasons for dialogue between people and peoples. Most fundamentally, ignorance breeds prejudice, bigotry and hostility. Therefore presenting oneself constructively to another is in one's enlightened self-interest. Knowledge about one another facilitates mutual security and respect.

Beyond this most basic need for dialogue is the responsibility we have to the values we believe in. If we wish to be true to values such as the sanctity of human life and dignity and their concomitant values of justice and peace, for example; then we have an obligation to engage others who believe in these values in order to pursue them together, to be greater than the sum of our different parts. Indeed if we fail to do so, we fail those values, we fail our Religious Traditions, we fail ourselves.

However Malachi appears to suggest that beyond these reasons for dialogue is a value of Divine service itself. The dialogue among believers is viewed by God as a manifestation of devotion to Him.

Isaiah declares (54 v. 6)

"seek the Lord where He may be found"

Jewish liturgy reflects the Biblical affirmation that we know and meet God both through the Creation as well as through History (in the revealed and redemptive Divine Presence). But there is only one creature that reflects the Divine Image and that is the human person. Especially when one encounters the other as one who lives in the awareness of the Divine Presence, the human encounter – the dialogue – acquires a religious value in and of itself. In other words when we respond to the Divine in the other, we are revering and respecting God Himself. True dialogue, in particular between believers, is thus a religious imperative.

This audience will be familiar with the theology of Martin Buber, which, like that of Emmanuel Levinas is simply a re-articulation of traditional Jewish teaching. Buber states the obvious, that the Bible itself is a record of the dialogueical encounters (I – Thou) between man and God which inspire that dialogueic encounter between humans.

Indeed in the latter half of the eighteenth chapter of Genesis, we read of the dramatic dialogue between Abraham and God over the future of Sodom. That dialogue itself is a reflection of the values of justice and compassion that reflect what the Bible and Jewish Tradition see as the essential Divine Attributes with which God engages humanity.

However we may say that Malachi's insight goes even further and declares that genuine dialogue between humans elicits the Divine pathos and thus facilitates the full I – Thou encounter between man and God.

Of course the dialogue between Jews and Christians is not a symmetrical one, neither historically nor theologically. The people and faith of Israel do not need Christianity in order to understand themselves, whereas Christianity cannot properly understand itself without reference to the people and faith of Israel. Thus the Jewish-Christian dialogue has an imperative for Christianity that is overwhelming and as the late Pope John Paul II described it, Christianity's relationship with Judaism is "unique and unlike the relationship that Christianity has to any other religion".

However there is also the burden of history and of the teaching of contempt towards Jews and Judaism – indeed repudiated by Nostra Aetate, but which still has a residual negative influence on attitudes towards Jews and Judaism among many in different places in the Christian world where the impact of Nostra Aetate and the subsequent relevant teachings of the Magisterium have not yet been received or absorbed. All this puts a heavy onus on the Christian side in the dialogue.

Yet the dialogue between Jews and Christians is a special one for Jews as well as Christians. It is not only the dialogue of those who share a belief in the Lord of Creation and History. It is rooted in the shared text of the Revelation at Sinai. For this reason, explains Rabbi Moses Rivkes the author of the Be'er HaGolah commentary on the Code of Jewish Law, Jews should have special concern for Christians. In this regard Rivkes is a continuation of Nachmanides before him and a precursor of the bold theology of Rabbi Jacob Emden after him.

Moreover as Christianity affirms the text and values of the Sinai revelation – notwithstanding the profound theological differences and conflicts between us – the Jewish People and its values are perforce reflected for better or worse within Christian affirmation. We therefore have as it were a stake in how the affirmations and values of the Hebrew Bible are reflected by Christianity throughout the world. In other words our own religious task of sanctifying the Divine Name in the world is bound up with the expression of the Sinai Revelation in the life of religious communities that see themselves as part and parcel of it, or at least umbilically connected to it.

To sum up we may say that the Jewish-Christian dialogue is not only essential for overcoming bigotry and prejudice; it is not only part of an imperative to work together for those values we share; it is in effect an expression of our awareness of the Divine Presence in our midst and its sanctification in the world.

We are blessed to live in a unique historic epoch in terms of the relationship between Jews and Christians and the Jewish and Catholic communities in particular. The transformation in Catholic teaching towards Jews and Judaism has been dramatic. Already in *Nostra Aetate* there is categorical repudiation of anti-Semitism, and the late John Paul II's description of it as a sin against God and man dramatized its significance. Similarly Pope John Paul II's description of the Jewish People as the "dearly beloved elder brother of the Church, of the original covenant never broken and never to be broken" – a formulation that he began to develop with his visit to the great synagogue in this city in 1986 – highlighted the change in Catholic theology which had led to a rejection of proselytism and the development of genuine dialogue with the Jewish people. This was further powerfully reflected in the Papal pilgrimage to the Land of Israel in the Jubilee year.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge those who pioneered and nurtured this dialogue that we are now able to pursue and especially the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry led by Cardinal Kasper, his predecessors and his colleagues.

For more than thirty five years we have had a formal structure for our bilateral dialogue, the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in which the partners are the aforementioned Commission and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations – the umbrella organization of World Jewry for interfaith relations – which I am privileged to currently preside over. Our dialogue has moved from what one might call a therapeutic dialogue of discourse, seeking to heal and overcome the wounds of the past and promote respect of one another, to a new dialogue of joint action. Our most recent gathering a few months ago in Cape Town South Africa, where we deliberated on our respective teachings on Healthcare with special focus on HIV/AIDS and ways in which we could combat the various tragic consequences of the pandemic – especially in Africa – is a reflection of how far the remarkable dialogue has come.

Of course, many organizations and movements have made important contributions to this process – the Community of Sant Egidio deserving special note.

Arguably the most dramatic development in recent years has been the establishment of a bilateral commission for dialogue between the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See, on which I am also privileged to serve, and a number of the leading protagonists in this dialogue are among the distinguished speakers and moderators here. This in many ways is a crowning achievement of the dialogue since the watershed of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*. Its success bodes well for our future.

The great nineteenth century Jewish sage Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berlin, known by his acrostic as the Netziv, in his commentary on the Pentateuch, declares that the time would come when the Christian world would recognize the blessing of Jacob, reflecting the embrace of Isaac's reunited sons, and this would be a genuine "metanoia". Then, he wrote, the Jewish people will respond in recognition of this special fraternity.

It is clear that we are the generation blessed to live in that era envisaged by the Netziv and to be able to dialogue both in order to overcome the damage of the past, know one another, to sanctify God's Name, and to be a blessing for the world.

As the late Pope John Paul II declared "as the children of Abraham we are called to be a blessing to the world. In order to be so, we must first be a blessing to one another."

This is both the challenge and the testimony of our dialogue.