
Jews and Dialogue

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Abstract: Judaism, except for around 100 BCE to 100 CE, has almost never sought the conversion of adherents of other faiths, which has, I suggest, meant, in particular, a somewhat more open acceptance of the validity of the other two main monotheistic faiths, and in recent times, an acceptance of the validity of Eastern religions, though this is less accepted in many of the more traditional forms of Judaism and is also more nuanced for all religious Jews, depending on the definition of idolatry and/or pantheism that is adopted and how it applies to them. This acceptance by Jews of the 'other' has not been uniform amongst different groups of Jews nor in all times or locations, and the desire of other religions to, shall we euphemistically say, 'encourage' the conversion of Jews to their faiths has left a difficult legacy. These themes are explored in the essay. It would seem to me that building understanding between people of religion is vital for a more peaceful world where, if we can acknowledge that we are all made in the Divine image, we will then be able to fight our common problems together.

Keywords: Dialogue, Dangers, Challenges, Noachide Laws, Chosen People, Monotheism

Introduction

It would seem to me that the world is in increasing need of dialogue between the religions. The word 'dialogue' covers a multitude of different possibilities, many referred to below, from having a meal together, to a full-blown conference of theologians, but basically in this context it refers to the meeting and positive interactions

1 Rabbi Tabick was born in Dublin in 1948 to a traditional Jewish family. They moved to London when she was eight years old. She went to University College, London, and read history. Her special topic was Monastic Life in the Medieval period. She became involved in interfaith work through her synagogue and rabbi, Dow Marmur. Her first foray into this area was when she went on a trip to Hamburg with a youth group led by Rabbi Marmur when she was 18. This event was one of the first arranged for Jewish and Christian youth groups to meet and dialogue after the Holocaust. In 1975, she was the first woman to be ordained a rabbi in the UK at Leo Baeck College. She married a fellow student, Larry, and together they have three children and five grandchildren. One son is a Masorti rabbi, the other is studying Talmud for a PhD. Rabbi Tabick worked at West London Synagogue for British Jews with Rabbi Hugo Gryn for over 25 years, then went to North West Surrey Reform Synagogue for a further 15 years. Leaving there, she took on convening the Beit Din (religious court) for the Reform Movement here and in Europe and was the rabbi of West Central Liberal Synagogue for 10 years. She remained interested in interfaith work throughout her career. She sat on the Interfaith Network for the UK for many years, was a patron of the Jewish Council for Refugees and is presently President of the World Congress of Faiths.

between people of different faiths. As Hans Kung, a Swiss Catholic priest, famously wrote in 1995, 'No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions' (Kung 2022). Looking around the world today, there can be no doubt in my mind of the need for dialogue between religious groups.

In so many ways the Global Village has become a reality. We strike up e-mail and social media friendships across the world. I can see and speak to my son in New York through the wonders of Zoom. But that has not stopped lack of true communication with other peoples, bringing inevitable mistrust, tragedy, and brutality in its wake. Indeed, social media is full of hatred, calls to violence and prejudicial misinformation.

In this so small world of ours, hatred between religious groups keeps erupting, and I believe Hans Kung is right, dialogue can help ameliorate this problem.

What is meant by 'dialogue'

Of course, first one has to try and define what is meant by dialogue, and one soon realises that there are many different definitions and levels. There is, firstly, what we might call the 'have a cuppa' variety – very popular and useful because it is normally non-threatening. It is the activity that has occupied much of my life as a rabbi over the years. I have visited countless schools and groups in churches and talked about some aspect of Jewish life. I have even held demonstration Passover seder meals, the ritual meal held the first evening of Passover, though I was always keen to tell them that contrary to common belief, Jesus would not have been involved in such a ritual as so many aspects of the seder developed after the second century CE.

Many such groups have visited our synagogue, had a tour and a talk and then been treated to light refreshments. These refreshments are a vital part of the process as they allow for visitors to interact with synagogue members and feel valued. Interestingly, while most synagogues seem open to receiving visitors, very few arrange for return visits to other places of worship. As the minority religion, I think many Jews feel they glean enough, certainly about Christianity, in school or TV or now, social media, that they do not need such visits to increase their knowledge.

These sort of interactions are the simplest form of dialogue and serve a very useful purpose in demonstrating that we Jews do not have horns or tails, and sometimes, happily, individuals in the different groups develop personal relationships. For many years, I was part of the chaplaincy team at a local hospice. During that time the Christian chaplain came to the synagogue for various festivals, and I took part in

Christmas memorial gatherings presenting a Jewish touch. The most wonderful result that arose from this casual relationship was that when he was going to get remarried, following a civil wedding, he and his wife asked me to do the religious honours, weaving together some Jewish traditions with other folk traditions and prayers that they had chosen. I felt very honoured.

One wonderful event happened before our Sabbath morning service, illustrating a simple act of dialogue. That morning, I came early for the service and found a Muslim family, obviously from the Gulf States. The husband explained that his wife had experienced many miscarriages and had come to London for specialist medical help. She had stayed nearby in bed for eight months and, hearing the music coming from our synagogue, she had vowed that, if the child was born alive, she would come to give thanks. So I blessed the beautiful baby, naming him Muhammed, in front of our open ark a special cupboard where we keep our scrolls of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. I often wonder if they have shared the interfaith nature of the blessing with their son as he grew and whether that story helped him view Jews and Judaism in a positive light. Most Jews are open to such superficial social and religious interactions. And in general, it is a chance to meet lovely people, for religious bigots are not usually attracted to interfaith events.

These interactions can even be taken to a slightly deeper level of dialogue, where the groups are sharing some deeper theological ideas. In Weybridge, my synagogue was the host for several Holocaust Memorial Day events, inviting people from local churches and schools to give presentations, and we also held interfaith evenings when we invited local clergy to come and share an aspect of their faith with us, although sometimes things can go wrong. At one of the Holocaust Memorial events, the local Baptist minister clearly told us that we should all convert to Christianity, and at one interfaith event, a deacon from Guildford Cathedral, responsible for interfaith dialogue, came and told me that as a modern woman, I would probably understand how the world would be a much better place if we could forget religious differences and worship Jesus.

Dangers of Dialogue for Jews

Today, it is my honour to look at the possibility of dialogue from within Judaism, and those last two stories illustrate why, for some Jews, interfaith dialogue is seen as dangerous. On too many occasions in the past, so-called dialogue has been used as an excuse to attempt to convert us Jews to the dominant religion, usually Christianity – a perversion of what is usually meant by ‘dialogue’.

You may have heard for example of the Barcelona disputation (July 20–24, 1263), between a Dominican Friar, Pablo Christiani, a convert from Judaism, and

Nachmanides (also called Ramban), a leading Jewish scholar, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator – a debate on whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. (For a dramatisation of the disputation see Maccoby 2001). It was held at the royal palace of King James I of Aragon in the presence of the King, his court, prominent ecclesiastical figures and knights. It was generally agreed that Ramban won the argument, but that did not stop him having to go into exile nor troubles coming to the local Jewish community; and that disputation was only one of many such events stretching through the centuries. In fact, my friends at school were involved in such an endeavour.

I was the only Jewish girl out of 93 in my year. I loved our headteacher, but when she retired, and the number of Jewish girls in each year jumped to around 40, I realised that she had been running an unofficial quota system. Apart from always having to answer basic questions about Judaism, the big test for me came when we were in our last year of school and my friends became involved in the Billy Graham Crusades. They left out leaflets for me on my desk. One friend, and she still is a friend, told me that because I was a good person maybe Jesus would hold the door of heaven open a crack for me so I could enter. I went to one of the Crusade meetings to pacify my friends, but as you can hear and see, I was left untouched by the experience. For this reason, many Jews tend to be wary of overtures to such discussions. In Islam, as acknowledged monotheists, we may have a lower status as *dhimmi* compared to Muslims, but we are not usually exposed to concerted attempts to convert us.

Deeper levels of dialogue as a challenge to one's own faith

Of course, to me, true dialogue does not have that aim of conversion. Rather it is the opening of a conversation between two or more groups of people who regard each other as equal partners in the hope that we can learn from each other and if necessary, revise any previous held prejudices that may have existed in our minds and maybe even learn something that will enrich our own faith. But then another danger presents itself: does such dialogue challenge the religious identity of the partners? After all, if I engage in such a dialogue and am truly open to what I am told and then afterwards assert the equal religious validity of the other person's path to God, then how can I say to Jewish people that I teach, especially the young, that Judaism is the way they should go? Again, it is that conundrum that dissuades many Jews from partaking in such discussions, especially those in the more traditional groups. As a Progressive Jew, I advise my fellow Jews that often, the most fulfilling and certainly the most convenient spiritual road, is the one that leads nearest from your home, but still, I can appreciate, that other religions also have different valid expressions of the Divine.

For, of course, as in all religious traditions, there are many kinds of Jews. I stand here before you as a Jew that hails from the more Progressive wing of Judaism. The way I interpret texts will differ from many of my co-religionists and affect how we treat each other. I believe that the core of our tradition, the Written Torah (the Five Books of Moses) and the accompanying Oral Torah, (found in such texts as the Mishnah, codified around the year 200 CE) were developed over hundreds of years by groups of men, and I use that word advisedly, and that the texts we treasure relate to the social conditions of the time. But I also believe in a Divine element in those texts. After all, the people concerned were involved in a spiritual search, and I am also conscious that the texts have been at the core of our being for up to 2500 years, so I do not take them lightly. On the other hand, my approach to those texts is bound to be different from those who believe they all came directly from the mouth of God and therefore they can only be interpreted within strict traditional rules.

Early mass conversions to Judaism and its dangers

Holding that view of Judaism's sacred texts, I would like to now turn to the first of two texts that I feel are vital in this discussion. It comes from the Tosefta, a compilation of Jewish oral law from the late second century and an important supplement to the Mishnah. There you find the teaching: 'The righteous people of all nations have a share in the world to come' (Tosefta, Sanhedrin 13:2). That is, in broad terms, someone does not have to be Jewish to go to heaven after death. I do not need to keep the door open a crack for my friends. I certainly do not need to assume a policy of trying to convert to Judaism everyone that I have a religious dialogue with. (The second text I will introduce later.)

Now it is true that the Inter-testamental and early rabbinic period saw several examples of mass conversion to Judaism. The traumatic results which followed some of these events helped underpin the somewhat ambivalent nature of later rabbinic responses to the phenomenon of conversion and the way converts were treated, and indeed, the numbers who wanted to join us. From self-rule under the Hasmonean dynasty, the Jewish people endured the violence of the Romans and the destruction of the Temple and exile, with all the changes to religious life this effected.

The other main problem affecting conversion was that Judaism, as a faith, was essentially different from the Graeco-Roman religions. See, for example, Armstrong 2009, 2-3 and *passim*.) In the classical world, religions centred mainly on mystical rites and myths, not on dogma. Conquered people were encouraged to add elements of the conqueror's faith onto their own, such as the erection of a Roman idol in the local temple. But Judaism, and later Christianity, was different to these cults in that each of them saw God as wanting His adherents to be exclusively His, with no elements of

syncretism allowed. This very different approach to religion meant that Judaism came to be seen as a threat. For example, Jewish missionary activity in Rome was punished by expulsion from the city in 139 BCE, 14-27 CE and 41-57 CE.

In addition, the Imperial acceptance of Christianity in the West, and, at the end of the Rabbinic period, Islam in the East, resulted in often severe restrictions being placed on the Jewish community. It became dangerous to accept converts. In 315, Constantine forbade conversions. In 438, again the Church forbade missionary activities by Jews on pain of death.

The ambivalence in the texts that arose from these historical trends has resulted in very different interpretations of the attitude of the rabbis towards converts as portrayed in modern sources. Thus, the historian Bernard Bamberger wrote that the leaders of the Jewish people 'were eager to make converts, were highly successful in winning them and friendly in their treatment of them' (Bamberger 1968, 274). George Foot Moore noticed a less inviting approach among the rabbis, 'Equality in law and religion does not necessarily carry with it complete social equality and the Jews would have been singularly unlike the rest of mankind if they felt no superiority to their heathen converts' (Moore 1927, 335). Rosenbloom notes that 'The convert simultaneously joined both the religion and the people, and this factor may have limited Judaism's success in attracting converts since they were expected to join themselves to the entirety of a cultural system. Judaism was relatively less successful than either Christianity or Islam due to both its demands on its converts and its failure in generating or joining a powerful imperium' (Rosenbloom 1978, 45). Hoenig notes that Judaism was definitely not a missionary religion in that it had no trained professionals or volunteers who set out with the aim of winning converts, but that the rabbis were open to the possibility (Hoenig 1965, 49).

It does seem, however, that around the beginning of the Christian era, converts were actively sought out. In Matthew 23:15 it says, 'Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You who travel over sea and land to make a single proselyte.' In the Hasmonean period (167-37 BCE) two major groups of people were forcibly converted to Judaism, the Idumeans and the Iturians. Neither conversion was successful. Herod the Great came from Idumean stock, and his reign was a disaster for the Jewish people. The Iturians never really integrated into the Jewish nation. On the other hand, individual conversions were apparently quite common. Josephus notes (Ant. XVI 7:6; XX 7) that Herod Agrippa's sister did not want to marry an Arabian nobleman who refused circumcision (the sign of the covenant) and Agrippa II's sister Berenice only married the King of Cilicia after he had converted.

Even under the Romans, Josephus noted a widespread interest in Judaism that could be exploited, 'The masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt our religious

observances and there is not one city, Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread and where the fasts and the lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed' (Against Apion 2:282). We also hear from Josephus of the conversion of the kingdom of Adiabene. It was found between the Caspian Sea and Antioch, a little south of Armenia. The Queen of the country, Helen, and her son Izares, both learnt separately of Judaism from Jewish merchants. Both converted and fought with the Jews against Rome. In 116 the kingdom was defeated by Trajan, and it disappeared from history. At some point, possibly in the Biblical period, there was the conversion of the Falashas in Ethiopia (Rosenbloom 1978, 115-117). and there were also stories in both Christian and Arabic sources of the people of Dhu Nuwas in Southern Arabia becoming Jewish en masse (Rosenbloom 1979, 101-103). The stories are complicated and contradictory, for the truth behind the conversion may have to do more with a desire to escape Abyssinian domination. This could have been one of the routes whereby knowledge of Judaism filtered through to Southern Arabia. Another route to the Arab world was through the Berbers of Morocco. There was no proof that actual conversion took place, but certainly Jewish ideas and customs became quite widespread in the years before Mohammed's army swept through the region (Rosenbloom 1979, 104-106).

On balance, proselytes were seen as an advantage to the people. A prayer was composed and placed within the 'Standing Prayer', the main strand of Jewish liturgy, for the *gerai tzedek*, 'righteous converts.' (See Talmud, Megillah 17b.) Other positive statements abound (See Talmud, Pesachim 87b; Mekhilta, Nezikin (Mishpatim) 18): 'Rabbi Johanan and R. Eliezar said, The Holy One Blessed be He, exiled Israel among the nations only in order to increase their numbers with the addition of proselytes.' And 'Proselytes are beloved in every place. He (God) considers them as part of Israel.' Lavish praise is paid to proselytes by the rabbis in the Midrash Tanchuma:

The convert is dearer to God than Israel. When the nation assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Israel would not have accepted the Torah without seeing the thunders and the lightnings and the quaking mountain and hearing the sound of the ram's horn. Whereas the proselyte, without a single miracle, consecrated himself to the Holy One, Blessed Be He, and puts upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. Can anyone be deemed more worthy of God's love?' (Tanchuma, Lech Lecha 6, 32a)

But what does become evident, both because of the social and political dangers of accepting converts, conversion to Judaism was eventually not prioritised and indeed the comment from the Tosefta became very important in all this. Jews did not need

to seek the conversion of others, even of their friends, for righteous people will have an entry to heaven. And under such a theological stance, dialogue is much easier to facilitate.

But who are the righteous? The Noachide Laws

The differing definitions of the term ‘the righteous’ reflect again the willingness or not to engage in discussion with peoples of other faiths. In the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:1, roughly contemporaneous with the Tosefta), a different picture emerges, more restrictive on who gains entrance to the World to Come, ‘All of the Jewish people, have a share in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: “And your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, for My name to be glorified” (Isaiah 60:21).’ This text restricts entrance to heaven to righteous Jews and bans Jews who would be excluded, such as those who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead or the divine authorship of Torah. This text was probably part of a battle between the Pharisees, who in the end edited such texts as the Mishnah, and the Sadducees, the older religious authority, associated with the Temple and political power until the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans.

Most define the righteous non-Jews who can enter heaven in terms of those who keep what has become known as the Seven Laws of Noah. (On these see AICE 2017.) For example, Joseph Albo, who lived in fifteenth-century Spain, wrote: ‘The Rabbis say: “The pious men of the other nations have a share in the world to come”. This shows that there may be two divine laws existing at the same time among different nations, and that each one leads those who live by it to attain human happiness, though there is a difference in the degree of happiness attainable by the two laws’ (Sefer Halkkarim 1:23). Though do notice that for him, Jews could attain a greater degree of happiness through obeying all the laws of the Torah.

The Noachide Laws are not explicitly mentioned in the Torah but were extrapolated from the Book of Genesis by second-century rabbis. Based on the verse from Genesis 9:9, where God speaks to Noah and his children as they exit the ark: ‘Behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you.’ The rabbis (Talmud, Sanhedrin 56a; cf. Tosefta, Avodah Zarah 8:4 and Genesis Rabbah 34:8) defined the laws as:

- Do establish laws/a system of justice.
- Do not curse God.
- Do not practice idolatry.

- Do not engage in illicit sexuality.
- Do not participate in bloodshed.
- Do not rob.
- Do not eat flesh from a living animal.

One of the problems regarding this teaching is of course the third law, for what is meant by idolatry? Silverstein states, ‘Crucially, in addition to the moral laws prescribed for non-Jews are prohibitions against blasphemy and idolatry. Thus, although in theory the Noachide Law should be universal, it only really applied to non-idolatrous theists, and in actual fact, Jews almost always had Christians and/or Muslims in mind when considering the concept’ (Silverstein 2015, 43-46). But what about the followers of Eastern religions? Can Jews freely enter into dialogue with them?

According to an article by Rachel Gelfman Schultz, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides (1135-1204) argued that Hinduism had not joined Abraham’s monotheistic mission and Hindus are a remnant of the Sabians, an idolatrous religious community that used to extend across the whole earth. Jacob ben Sheshet, (thirteenth century CE) also identified Hinduism with idolatry and attacked those Jews who learned wisdom from the Indians because he believed it would lead to idolatry.

But gradually, from the beginning of the modern era, Schultz suggested, some Jewish scholars began to see Eastern religions in a more positive light. In *Jerusalem*, Moses Mendelssohn, an eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment philosopher, argued that we should not be so quick to judge other religions, for first one must investigate how its own practitioners see it. Martin Buber, a twentieth-century thinker, made no mention of the idolatrous nature of Eastern religions and suggested that they made positive contributions to his own understanding of Jewish spirituality. Buber drew from Taoism and Zen in his discussions of Jewish spirituality. For example, he discusses the Taoist emphasis on the One – a sense of mystical unity – in his analysis of Hasidic mysticism. He cautioned, however, that we must learn more about Judaism so we can also see the differences: for example, Judaism maintains that the world is real and not a delusion, while Buber understood that the Taoist Chuang Tzu saw the world as indistinguishable from a dream.

Schultz also writes that Schachter-Shalomi could see the benefits of learning about spirituality from these religions, while another twentieth-century rabbi, Hollander, argued that all Eastern religions are idolatrous and should be shunned. So, some would see dialogue with these Eastern religions as a rich source of learning and a

wonderful partner in dialogue, whilst others see them a dangerous trend leading especially the young away from Judaism and contact with them to be avoided.

But there are two other issues associated with the Noachide Laws. There are some rabbis in modern times, such as Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the deceased Lubavitcher rebbe, who may not want to convert everyone to Judaism, but who do see it as their duty to bring everyone to observe these seven laws (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menachem_Mendel_Schneerson, see also Feldman 2017).

Some attached to the Temple Institute have called upon Jews to help form a modern Noachide movement, but these calls are associated with a belief in the supremacy of Judaism above all other religions and a Messianic cult that believes in the building of a third Temple in place of the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem (Feldman 2017) – not a great pathway to positive relationships! In March 2016, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yitzhak Yosef, declared: ‘According to Jewish law, it’s forbidden for a non-Jew to live in the Land of Israel – unless he has accepted the seven Noahide laws [...]. If the non-Jew is unwilling to accept these laws, then we can send him to Saudi Arabia’ (Sharon 2016). This statement was offensive and shocking, but it reminds us that there is another reality to interfaith interactions that we ignore at our peril.

The Chosen People

This brings us to another tension surrounding dialogue and the Noachide Laws – the concept known as the ‘Chosen People.’ To some, this means that Jews are inherently better than everyone else and it is based on such statements in the Torah as, ‘For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession’ (Deuteronomy 14:2). This concept has led to many statements extolling the superiority of the Jewish people. For example, Yehudah Halevi, perhaps influenced by twelfth-century Shi’i literature of the time, expounds this concept in *Kuzari*, explaining that Jewish souls are superior to other souls and even if a non-Jew converts, his soul can never reach the heights of a Jewish soul (*Kuzari* I, 95 & *passim*).

Much later, this became a basic teaching of some Hasidic sects in the eighteenth century, especially through the teachings of the Tanya, the writings of Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Lubavitch sect (see *Tanya*, pt. 1, ch.1), and so they have remained popular in many of the right-wing groups of Judaism until today; and sometimes, even modern Orthodox Jews can become embroiled in these arguments.

I remember the great joy among my interfaith friends when Rabbi Jonathan Sacks first published *The Dignity of Difference*. The first edition contained the passage, ‘God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to the Jews,

Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims... God is the God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity' (Sacks 2002, 55). The first edition sparked a storm of criticism from fervently Orthodox rabbis in Britain and Israel. The book was called 'a grave deviation from the pathways of traditional and authentic Judaism.' Rabbi Joseph Dunner and Rabbi Bezalel Rakow demanded that Sacks 'repudiate the thesis of the book and withdraw the book from circulation.' See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Sacks,_Baron_Sacks.) There even were rumours that Sacks would face charges of apostasy. To the dismay of many British Jews, Sacks backed down and issued a revised edition. This second edition stated, 'God communicates in human language, but there are dimensions of the divine that must forever elude us. As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures, and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of the Noahide laws' (Sacks 2003, 55). This was far less expansive than the first statement.

The second main text

On the other hand, there is also in the Bible the teaching from Genesis, the second text I want to especially share with you that can be used as a basis for supporting positive interactions, dialogues, between Jews and people of other faiths: 'And God said, "Let us make man in our likeness"' (Genesis 1:26) – all humanity, not just Jews. The Hebrew Bible contains many stories, even books, about or written by righteous non-Jews, such as Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-21) and Jethro (Exodus 18), and the books of Jonah and Job, although, of course, there are many contradictory phrases, even by the same author. So, in Amos we find, 'You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth – that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities' (Amos 3:2). But also, "'To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians" – declares the Lord' (Amos 9:7).

In rabbinic writings, even at a time of Roman persecution, Rabbi Akiva said:

Beloved is the human being in that he was created in the Image [of God]. Even greater love was shown to them in that it was made known to them that humans were created in the Image, as it is said, 'In the image of God was the human made' (Genesis 9:6). Beloved are [the people of] Israel for they are called the children of God. Even greater love was shown to Israel in that it was made known to them that they are called God's children as it is said, 'You are the children of the Lord your God' (Deuteronomy 14:1). (Pirkei Avot 3:8)

According to Akiva, all human beings are beloved of God. All are created in the image of God. Israel, however, has a special, close relationship to God. This was his un-

derstanding of chosenness. But as my colleague Rabbi Hugo Gryn often said, quoting, he said, a Yiddish proverb, 'Just because you love your grandmother doesn't mean you can't equally love your grandfather!'

This phrase from Genesis provided the foundation for rabbinic Judaism's attitude toward humanity. We are told that the sages taught: 'Only one human being was created in the world... in order to create harmony among humans so that one cannot say to another, "My father is greater than your father."' Furthermore, only one human being was created in order to teach that 'if one destroys one person it is accounted to him as if he had destroyed an entire world and if one sustains one life it is accounted to him as if he had sustained an entire world' (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5).

A recent response written for the Conservative Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly of America states that

The Torah teaches the equality of all human beings created in the image of God and is positive toward non-Israelites. Rabbinic literature similarly contains numerous positive statements about Gentiles, ...and that many ... negative statements and depictions can be explained as normal reactions to the exceedingly cruel treatment of Jews by non-Jews, be it the Roman Empire, the Church or others. Some, however, go far beyond that, positing an exclusivist theology. Dealing with discriminatory laws and negative texts when teaching our tradition to youth and adults can be problematic, to say nothing of how we deal with them when interacting with Gentiles. This has become particularly acute in the Diaspora today where Jews are in constant contact with Gentiles and enjoy equal rights and equal status. At a time when other religious groups, such as the Catholic Church, are re-examining their attitudes towards Jews and making changes in their dogmas to eliminate negative doctrines, we can hardly do less. (Hammer 2016, 1)

This is indeed what probably most Jews nowadays feel and do, outside of those in the extreme right-wing groups. This more open attitude is of course vital to developing good relationships with the other religious groups in this world also searching for a pathway to serving God, and leads to those positive instances of dialogue that I so support.

Recently a group of prominent Israeli Orthodox rabbis issued a statement (CJCUC, 2015) in Israel entitled 'To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians' calling for cooperation between Jews and Christians to address the moral and religious challenges of our times. The conclusions of this paper said we must

...declare our belief that all humans share a common ancestry and are equally created in the divine image. Living in an interconnected world when enlightened religious leaders of all faiths are seeking ways of reconciliation, we as Jews, whether living in the diaspora with equal rights, or in Israel where we have the responsibility of caring for the rights of our fellow citizens of minority groups, cannot allow ourselves to be influenced by teachings that disseminate hatred and disdain for human beings of whatever nation or faith... following the rulings of Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Akiva and the later teachings of the Meiri and others, we declare that all rules discriminating against Gentiles in matters of a civil nature and moral actions are no longer to be considered authoritative in Judaism not only because of the harm they cause to the image of Judaism and to relations with non-Jews, but because they are intrinsically immoral and deter us from attaining the honest virtues to which we aspire as Jews.²

Progressive Jews, and many modern Orthodox, would describe the concept of the Chosen People as a call to us to carry out God's call to us to obey God's laws. This idea is clearly stated in the blessing before we read Torah, 'who has chosen us from all people and given us the Torah.'

Conclusion

In Judaism, the mystics call the one God, *Ayn Sof*, 'Without End', that is, God is far beyond our limited understanding of the Divine Essence. Indeed, our understanding

2 Published on December 3rd, 2015 on the website of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation (CJCUC). Unfortunately, and without explanation, this paragraph has since been removed from this page. But the following does appear, as of 30.9.2022: '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. We understand the hesitation of both sides to affirm this truth and we call on our communities to overcome these fears in order to establish a relationship of trust and respect. Rabbi Hirsch also taught that the Talmud puts Christians "with regard to the duties between man and man on exactly the same level as Jews. They have a claim to the benefit of all the duties not only of justice but also of active human brotherly love." In the past relations between Christians and Jews were often seen through the adversarial relationship of Esau and Jacob, yet Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berliner (Netziv) already understood at the end of the nineteenth century that Jews and Christians are destined by G-d to be loving partners: "In the future when the children of Esau are moved by pure spirit to recognise the people of Israel and their virtues, then we will also be moved to recognise that Esau is our brother.'" <https://www.cjcuc.org/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity/>

is not even a scratch on eternity. I also firmly believe that many equally valid paths are required to suit the diversity of need and culture that graces this earth. So, I hope I do not just tolerate other faiths but celebrate the differences. And all this in the name of the One God who so many believe was the creative force behind the creation of the All.

Rabbi David Zeller, sadly now deceased, described the spiritual process as an inward journey to seek the oneness of life and soul that we knew in the Garden of Eden before we ate of the tree of knowledge. At several Limmud conferences in England I heard him say that, because we have gained some knowledge of the material/scientific world, we have forgotten that the world is really one. Zeller maintained that the Garden of Eden still exists in our world, a place where it is possible to experience real deep spiritual joy, but we can no longer see it because our limited and superficial understanding of the knowledge we have gained tends to split up the world, not unite it. I think of the many doctors who only treat their own speciality and forget that it is one person who is standing there before them, and the pain in their left toe can also be affecting the way they feel about life. But, of course, the aim of spirituality, Zeller taught, is the humbling of the self, so that we can grow into an awareness of being part of a bigger pattern, and then break through the limits we place upon ourselves and change the way we can help or relate to each other.

This seems to relate to the teachings of the environmentalists – that the world is really one, and we must respond to that unity or perish. It also relates to the teaching of the great leaders in the interfaith world. Sir Francis Younghusband, the founder of the World Congress of Faiths, one of the oldest interfaith groups in this country, understood this idea of oneness behind creation. His introduction to Eastern mysticism in the mountains of Tibet flooded his mind with the knowledge that at the basis of all religions, there lies the greatness of the One.

In the words of Rabbi Israel Mattuck, Chair of the Society of Jews and Christians, rabbi of Liberal Jewish Synagogue from 1912 to his death in 1954:

Now, I am not pleading for one religion to include all men, I like diversity. I should no more want a world with one religion than I should want only one coloured rose in my garden. But we can have diversity without enmity; and when we do, then I believe that the world will be more ready to receive our message about human unity and human peace. When they who try to live in the name of God can show that because of their worship of Him they recognise the unity of the human family, then others will see the power for good that the religious outlook possesses. And in the end, my fellow men and women, only in God can humanity be unified: ‘They shall not hurt or destroy in all

my holy mountain, saith the Lord, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.' Through the knowledge of God, which gives men an understanding of the true aims of life and impels them to work, yea, to sacrifice for those aims, through that knowledge of God, nations shall be exalted in righteousness and humanity established in peace. (Mattuck 1936, 422).

It is tempting for each of us to retire into our embattled religious communities and devote all our time to building them up. It is true, without proper knowledge and appreciation of our own faiths, we make poor and inadequate religious dialogue partners. But if we remain only within our own faith groups, then prejudice will spread, and we will be denying ourselves the knowledge and understanding of the essential oneness that unites us and we will deprive ourselves of lessons about the Divine essence that all of us can learn from each other.

I firmly believe that understanding and interaction between people of different faith-communities is important for healing suspicions, forging strong bonds of community, and generating a renewed spiritual vision of justice and peace in our own societies and throughout the world.

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