



National Council of Synagogues and the Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs
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Reflections on Covenant and Mission

**Consultation of the National Council of Synagogues and
the Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs
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PREFACE

For more than twenty years leaders of the Jewish and Roman Catholic communities in the United States have met semi-annually to discuss a wide range of topics affecting Catholic-Jewish relations. Currently, the participants in these ongoing consultations are delegates of the Bishops Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (BCEIA) and of the National Council of Synagogues (NCS). The NCS represents the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Judaism, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. The Consultation is co-chaired by His Eminence William Cardinal Keeler, the U.S. bishops' moderator for Catholic-Jewish relations and Rabbi Joel Zaiman, of the Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Judaism and Rabbi Michael Signer of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The dialogues have previously produced public statements on such issues as Children and the Environment and Acts of Religious Hatred.

At its meeting held on March 13, 2002 in New York City, the BCEIA-NCS Consultation examined how the Jewish and Roman Catholic traditions currently understand the subjects of Covenant and Mission. Each delegation prepared reflections that were discussed and clarified by the Consultation as statements of the current state of the question in each community. The BCEIA-NCS Consultation voted to issue its considerations publicly in order to encourage serious reflection on these matters by Jews and Catholics throughout the United States. After taking time to refine the initial statements, the separate Roman Catholic and Jewish reflections on the subjects of Covenant and Mission are presented below.

The Roman Catholic reflections describe the growing respect for the Jewish tradition that has unfolded since the Second Vatican Council. A deepening Catholic appreciation of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, together with a recognition of a divinely-given mission to Jews to witness to God's faithful love, lead to the conclusion that campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church.

The Jewish reflections describe the mission of the Jews and the perfection of the world. This mission is seen to have three aspects. First, there are the obligations that arise as a result of the loving election of the Jewish people into a covenant with God. Second, there is a mission of witness to God's redeeming power in the world. Third, the Jewish people have a mission that is addressed to all human beings. The Jewish reflections conclude by urging Jews and Christians to articulate a common agenda to heal the world.

The NCS-BCEIA Consultation is concerned about the continuing ignorance and caricatures of one another that still prevail in many segments of the Catholic and Jewish communities. It is the hope of the Consultation that these reflections will be read and discussed as part of an ongoing process of increasing mutual understanding.

The NCS-BCEIA Consultation reaffirms its commitment to continue deepening our dialogue and to promote amity between the Jewish and Catholic communities in the United States.

ROMAN CATHOLIC REFLECTIONS

Introduction

The gifts brought by the Holy Spirit to the Church through the Second Vatican Council's declaration [Nostra Aetate](#) continue to unfold. The decades since its proclamation in 1965 have witnessed a steady rapprochement between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish people. Although controversies and misunderstandings continue to occur, there has nonetheless been a gradual deepening of mutual understanding and common purpose.

Nostra Aetate also inspired a series of magisterial instructions, including three documents prepared by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: [Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration, Nostra Aetate No. 4](#) (1974); [Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church](#) (1985); and [We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah](#) (1998). Pope John Paul II has offered many addresses and engaged in several important actions that have furthered Catholic and Jewish amity. Numerous statements concerning Catholic-Jewish relations have also been composed by national conferences of Catholic bishops from around the world. In the United States, the conference of Catholic bishops and its committees have issued many relevant documents, including: [Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations](#) (1967, 1985); *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* (1988); *God's Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching* (1988); and most recently *Catholic Teaching on the Shoah: Implementing the Holy See's We Remember* (2001).

A survey of these Catholic statements over the past few decades shows that they have progressively been considering more and more aspects of the complex relationship between Jews and Catholics, together with their impact on the practice of the Catholic faith. This work inspired by *Nostra Aetate* has involved interfaith dialogue, collaborative educational ventures, and joint theological and historical research by Catholics and Jews. It will continue into the new century.

At the present moment in this process of renewal, the subjects of covenant and mission have come to the forefront. *Nostra Aetate* initiated this thinking by citing Romans 11:28-29 and describing the Jewish people as "very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made." John Paul II has explicitly taught that Jews are "the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God," "the present-day people of the covenant concluded with Moses," and "partners in a covenant of eternal love which was never revoked."

The post-*Nostra Aetate* Catholic recognition of the permanence of the Jewish people's covenant relationship to God has led to a new positive regard for the post-biblical or rabbinic Jewish tradition that is unprecedented in Christian history. The Vatican's 1974 *Guidelines* insisted that Christians "must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience." The 1985 Vatican *Notes* praised post-biblical Judaism for carrying "to the whole world a witness - often heroic - of its fidelity to the one God and to 'exalt Him in the presence of all the living' (Tobit 13:4)." The *Notes* went on to refer to John Paul II in urging Christians to remember "how the permanence of Israel is accompanied by a continuous spiritual fecundity, in the rabbinical period, in the Middle Ages and in modern times, taking its start from a patrimony which we long shared, so much so that 'the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church' (John Paul II, 6 March 1982)." This theme has been taken up in statements by the United States Catholic bishops, such as *God's Mercy Endures Forever*, which advised preachers to "[b]e free to draw on Jewish sources (rabbinic, medieval, and modern) in expounding the meaning of the

Hebrew Scriptures and the apostolic writings.”

Post-biblical Judaism’s “spiritual fecundity” continued in lands in which Jews were a tiny minority. This was true in Christian Europe even though, as Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy has noted, “from the time of the Emperor Constantine on, Jews were isolated and discriminated against in the Christian world. There were expulsions and forced conversions. Literature propagated stereotypes [and] preaching accused the Jews of every age of deicide.” This historical summary intensifies the importance of the teaching of the 1985 Vatican *Notes* that, “The permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God’s design.”

Knowledge of the history of Jewish life in Christendom also causes such biblical texts as Acts 5:33-39 to be read with new eyes. In that passage the Pharisee Gamaliel declares that only undertakings of divine origin can endure. If this New Testament principle is considered by Christians today to be valid for Christianity, then it must logically also hold for post-biblical Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism, which developed after the destruction of the Temple, must also be “of God.”

In addition to these theological and historical considerations, in the decades since *Nostra Aetate* many Catholics have been blessed with the opportunity to experience personally Judaism’s rich religious life and God’s gifts of holiness.

The Mission of the Church: Evangelization

Such reflections on and experiences of the Jewish people’s eternal covenantal life with God raise questions about the Christian task of bearing witness to the gifts of salvation that the Church receives through her “new covenant” in Jesus Christ. The Second Vatican Council summed up the Church’s mission as follows:

While helping the world, and receiving many benefits from it, the Church has a single intention: that God’s kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass. For every benefit which the People of God during its earthly pilgrimage can offer to the human family stems from the fact that the Church is “the universal sacrament of salvation,” simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God’s love for humanity.

This mission of the Church can be summarized in one word: evangelization. Pope Paul VI gave the classic definition, “The Church appreciates that evangelization means the carrying forth of the good news to every sector of the human race so that by its strength it may enter into the hearts of men and renew the human race.” Evangelization refers to a complex reality that is sometimes misunderstood by reducing it only to the seeking of new candidates for baptism. It is the Church’s continuation of the mission of Jesus Christ, who embodied the life of the kingdom of God. As Pope John Paul II has explained,

The kingdom is the concern of everyone: individuals, society and the world. Working for the kingdom means acknowledging and promoting God’s activity, which is present in human history and transforms it. Building the kingdom means working for liberation from evil in all its forms. In a word, the kingdom of God is the manifestation and the realization of God’s plan of salvation in all its fullness.

It should be stressed that evangelization, the Church’s work on behalf of the kingdom of God, cannot be separated from its faith in Jesus Christ in whom Christians find the kingdom “present and fulfilled.” Evangelization includes the Church’s activities of presence and witness; commitment to social development and human liberation; Christian worship, prayer, and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; and proclamation and catechesis.

This latter activity of proclamation and catechesis – the “invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and to entry through baptism into the community of believers which is the church” – is sometimes thought to be synonymous with “evangelization.” However, this is a very narrow construal and is indeed only one among many aspects of the Church’s “evangelizing mission” in the service of God’s kingdom. Thus, Catholics participating in interreligious dialogue, a mutually enriching sharing of gifts devoid of any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism, are nonetheless witnessing to their own faith in the kingdom of God embodied in Christ. This is a form of evangelization, a way of engaging in the Church’s mission.

Evangelization and the Jewish People

Christianity has an utterly unique relationship with Judaism because “our two religious communities are connected and closely related at the very level of their respective religious identities.”

The history of salvation makes clear our special relationship with the Jewish people. Jesus belongs to the Jewish people, and he inaugurated his church within the Jewish nation. A great part of the Holy Scriptures, which we Christians read as the word of God, constitute a spiritual patrimony which we share with Jews. Consequently, any negative attitude in their regard must be avoided, since “in order to be a blessing for the world, Jews and Christians need first to be a blessing for each other.”

In the wake of *Nostra Aetate*, there has been a deepening Catholic appreciation of many aspects of our unique spiritual linkage with Jews. Specifically, the Catholic Church has come to recognize that its mission of preparing for the coming of the kingdom of God is one that is shared with the Jewish people, even if Jews do not conceive of this task christologically as the Church does. Thus, the 1985 Vatican *Notes* observed:

Attentive to the same God who has spoken, hanging on the same Word, we have to witness to one same memory and one common hope in Him who is the master of history. We must also accept our responsibility to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah by working together for social justice, respect for the rights of persons and nations and for social and international reconciliation. To this we are driven, Jews and Christians, by the command to love our neighbor, by a common hope for the Kingdom of God and by the great heritage of the Prophets.

If the Church, therefore, shares a central and defining task with the Jewish people, what are the implications for the Christian proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ? Ought Christians to invite Jews to baptism? This is a complex question not only in terms of Christian theological self-definition, but also because of the history of Christians forcibly baptizing Jews.

In a remarkable and still most pertinent study paper presented at the sixth meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in Venice twenty-five years ago, Prof. Tommaso Federici examined the missiological implications of *Nostra Aetate*. He argued on historical and theological grounds that there should be in the Church no organizations of any kind dedicated to the conversion of Jews. This has over the ensuing years been the de facto practice of the Catholic Church.

More recently, Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Commission for the Religious Relations with the Jews, explained this practice. In a formal statement made first at the seventeenth meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in May 2001, and repeated later in the year in Jerusalem, Cardinal Kasper spoke of “mission” in a narrow sense to mean “proclamation” or the invitation to baptism and catechesis. He showed why such initiatives are not appropriately directed at Jews:

The term mission, in its proper sense, refers to conversion from false gods and idols to the true and one God, who revealed himself in the salvation history with His elected people. Thus mission, in this

strict sense, cannot be used with regard to Jews, who believe in the true and one God. Therefore, and this is characteristic, there exists dialogue but there does not exist any Catholic missionary organization for Jews.

As we said previously, dialogue is not mere objective information; dialogue involves the whole person. So in dialogue Jews give witness of their faith, witness of what supported them in the dark periods of their history and their life, and Christians give account of the hope they have in Jesus Christ. In doing so, both are far away from any kind of proselytism, but both can learn from each other and enrich each other. We both want to share our deepest concerns to an often disoriented world that needs such witness and searches for it.

From the point of view of the Catholic Church, Judaism is a religion that springs from divine revelation. As Cardinal Kasper noted, "God's grace, which is the grace of Jesus Christ according to our faith, is available to all. Therefore, the Church believes that Judaism, i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises."

This statement about God's saving covenant is quite specific to Judaism. Though the Catholic Church respects all religious traditions and through dialogue with them can discern the workings of the Holy Spirit, and though we believe God's infinite grace is surely available to believers of other faiths, it is only about Israel's covenant that the Church can speak with the certainty of the biblical witness. This is because Israel's scriptures form part of our own biblical canon and they have a "perpetual value . . . that has not been canceled by the later interpretation of the New Testament."

According to Roman Catholic teaching, both the Church and the Jewish people abide in covenant with God. We both therefore have missions before God to undertake in the world. The Church believes that the mission of the Jewish people is not restricted to their historical role as the people of whom Jesus was born "according to the flesh" (Rom 9:5) and from whom the Church's apostles came. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger recently wrote, "God's providence ... has obviously given Israel a particular mission in this 'time of the Gentiles.'" However, only the Jewish people themselves can articulate their mission "in the light of their own religious experience."

Nonetheless, the Church does perceive that the Jewish people's mission *ad gentes* (to the nations) continues. This is a mission that the Church also pursues in her own way according to her understanding of covenant. The command of the Resurrected Jesus in Matthew 28:19 to make disciples "of all nations" (Greek = *ethnē*, the cognate of the Hebrew = *goyim*; i.e., the nations other than Israel) means that the Church must bear witness in the world to the Good News of Christ so as to prepare the world for the fullness of the kingdom of God. However, this evangelizing task no longer includes the wish to absorb the Jewish faith into Christianity and so end the distinctive witness of Jews to God in human history.

Thus, while the Catholic Church regards the saving act of Christ as central to the process of human salvation for all, it also acknowledges that Jews already dwell in a saving covenant with God. The Catholic Church must always evangelize and will always witness to its faith in the presence of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ to Jews and to all other people. In so doing, the Catholic Church respects fully the principles of religious freedom and freedom of conscience, so that sincere individual converts from any tradition or people, including the Jewish people, will be welcomed and accepted.

However, it now recognizes that Jews are also called by God to prepare the world for God's kingdom. Their witness to the kingdom, which did not originate with the Church's experience of Christ crucified and raised, must not be curtailed by seeking the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity. The distinctive Jewish witness must be sustained if Catholics and Jews are truly to be, as Pope John Paul II

has envisioned, “a blessing to one another.” This is in accord with the divine promise expressed in the New Testament that Jews are called to “serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before God all [their] days” (Luke 1:74-75).

With the Jewish people, the Catholic Church, in the words of *Nostra Aetate*, “awaits the day, known to God alone, when all peoples will call on God with one voice and serve him shoulder to shoulder (Soph 3:9; see Is 66:23; Ps 65:4; Rom 11:11-32).”

JEWISH REFLECTIONS

The Mission of the Jews and the Perfection of the World

In the endless quest to bring meaning to life, communities, just like individuals, seek to define their mission in the world. So it is certainly for the Jews.

The mission of the Jews is part of a three-fold mission that is rooted in Scripture and developed in later Jewish sources. There is, first, the mission of *covenant*: the ever-formative impetus to Jewish life that results from the covenant between God and the Jews. Second, the mission of *witness*, whereby the Jews see themselves (and are frequently seen by others) as God’s eternal witnesses to His existence and to His redeeming power in the world. And third, the mission of *humanity*, a mission that understands the Biblical history of the Jews as containing a message to more than the Jews alone. It presupposes a message and a mission addressed to all human beings.

The Mission of Covenant

The Jews are the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the physical embodiment of God’s covenant with these ancestors.

Abraham not only sets out on a journey to the Land of Canaan after being called by God, but when he is ninety-nine years old, God appears to him and tells him: “Walk in my ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.” The covenant is described as “everlasting,... to be God to you and to your offspring to come. The covenant involves the Land of Canaan which is an everlasting holding. There is a physical symbol of the covenant: the circumcision of all males on the eighth day of their lives.

The covenant is both physical and spiritual. The Jews are a physical people. The covenant is a covenant of the flesh. The Land is a physical place. But it is also a covenant of the spirit for it is connected to “walking in His ways.”

The Jews are a people called into existence by God through a loving election. Why would God do such a thing? The Torah tells us the story of a unique God who, so different from the God of Aristotle, was not content with contemplating Himself. It is a great mystery, but God, who is essentially beyond our ken, willed a world into existence. He gave His creatures a single commandment, not to eat of a certain fruit of the Garden of Eden. What, of course, do they do? They eat the fruit.

And so God, who had decided to share His ineffable self, was denied. It was not long before the earth became corrupt before God. And so He began again, destroying the creation, bringing the primordial waters back together and leaving only Noah and his family. Yet that too does not work, for no sooner are they out of the Ark than Noah gets drunk and uncovers himself. Downhill again – until the Torah begins the story that works, that is the heart of the Bible’s saga: the story of Abraham and his progeny, the Jews.

The covenant is not just a promise or a general exhortation toward perfection. When the People of Israel has turned into a large community and has suffered Pharaoh’s bondage, the people is

redeemed from Egypt with extraordinary wonders. They come to Sinai and the covenant gains its content: the laws and statutes given there and subsequently in the Tent of Meeting.

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now, then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

To Jews this is not divine flattery but the burden of divine obligation. And this, then, is the theological definition of the Jews: a physical people called upon to live in a special relationship with God. That relation has specific content. There are rewards for its observance, punishments for its abandonment.

Such a view of the Jews is not tailored to fit the normal sociological definitions of a people, a community or a folk. It is even possible that most Jews would be uncomfortable with this theological sociology. People are usually more satisfied with picturing the Jews either as an ethnic group or as a faith community untied to a people. But that is not the notion of the Jews in the Bible and in later Jewish literature. The Jews are, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, partners with God in a sometimes stormy and sometimes idyllic romance, in a loving marriage that binds God and the People of Israel together forever and which gives the deepest possible meaning to Jewish existence.

The practical result of all of this is that the first mission of the Jews is toward the Jews. It means that the Jewish community is intent upon preserving its identity. Since that does not always happen naturally, it is the reason why Jews talk to each other constantly about institutional strengths and the community's ability to educate its children. It creates an abhorrence of intermarriage. It explains the passion to study the Torah. The stakes are high in Jewish life and in order not to abandon God, the Jewish community expends a great deal of energy seeing to it that the covenantal community works.

The Mission of Witness

Isaiah speaks to a role the Jews play that goes beyond themselves. "My witnesses are *you* - declares the Lord - my servant whom I have chosen."

The Jews are His witnesses that there is a God in the world who is its Creator, that He is one and that idols have no power - "To me every knee shall bend and every tongue vow loyalty" - and that the power of God is a redemptive power, one more awesome than human beings can conceive.

How is the power of God manifest? In the life of nations, including the fall and rise of the nation of Israel. And it is well known through the Torah and the prophetic books that the suffering of Israel is understood to be a witness to God's covenant with Israel.

What is not understood, at least not well enough, is that God wants the nations to see the redemption of Israel and be impressed. That is, for example, what God wants the Pharaoh and the people of Egypt to see. It is not enough, apparently, to simply redeem the people of Israel from bondage. The redemption is designed to be public, filled with signs and wonders. For it is designed to teach the great nation of Egypt about the power, the glory and the interest of the God of Israel in redeeming slaves.

It is also in this sense that the prophet Isaiah speaks of the Jews as a "light to nations." "I raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel: I will also make you a light to nations, *that My salvation may reach the ends of the earth.*" The nations will look and see the redemption of the people of Israel and they will be amazed. They will therefore learn, if they had not learned before, that the Lord, God of Israel, restores His people to His land.

The herald of joy to Zion says: "Let every valley be raised, every hill and mount made low. Let the rugged ground become level and the ridges become a plain." This is not rhetoric about some mystical manifestation of God transforming nature. It is bold imagery to speak about the creation of an extraordinary highway to bring back the exiled people to their land.

While we spend a good deal of time thinking about our sins, it is not suffering that is God's message. God's message is the power of repentance and the power of His love as manifested in the redemption of Israel. One of the great needs of theology, therefore, is to detach itself from the message of suffering. The great message of God is the power of redemption. The great hope of the Jews is their redemption and the rebuilding of their nation state. The witness to be borne is the witness of God who redeems His people.

The Mission of Humanity

The message of the Bible is a message and a vision not only to Israel but to all of humanity. Isaiah speaks twice of the Jews as a light to peoples and we have so far referred to his statement in the forty-ninth chapter. What else does he mean when he speaks of the Jews as a "covenant people and a light to nations?" The medieval commentator, David Kimhi, sees the light that comes forth as the light of the Torah that comes forth from Zion. Since the message of the Torah is peace, the light that comes forth conveys a message of the blessing of peace that ought reign throughout the world. The messianic vision is: "And he shall speak peace to the nations." Thus, Isaiah notes that in those times "He will judge among the nations and arbitrate for the many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks."

It is a mistake to be like Jonah and to think that God is concerned only with the Jews. When Jonah is asked to go to Nineveh, a great gentile city, Jonah refuses God's command to tell the people of Nineveh to repent. He only learns through suffering that God's word is to the Ninevites as well. He finally goes there and the people of Nineveh call a fast. Great and small alike put on sackcloth, even the king. Not only did they fast, for the Bible says that they "turned back from their evil ways."

Though one might have thought that Jonah would be thrilled by his success, he is bereft - and there are probably two reasons for this. First, he believed that sin should be punished and that God's mercies should not take away that punishment. And second, who were the people of Nineveh? What right did they have to expect God's intimate concern and forgiving love?

Jonah leaves the city and sits to its east, making a booth and sitting in its shade. And the Lord makes a gourd to grow above him, providing shade over his head. Jonah was so happy! Until God appointed a worm at dawn the next day who attacked the plant until it withered. And then God brought up a light east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head until he fainted. And he wanted to die.

Then God says to Jonah, "Are you so deeply angry about the plant?... You care about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than twelve myriad persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!"

The God of the Bible is the God of the world. His visions are visions for all of humanity. His love is a love that extends to every creature.

The suffering man of the Scriptures, Job, is not portrayed in any way as if he is a Jew. Is it any wonder? The suffering of humanity is limited to no particular people. The covenant might make the issue particularly troublesome for Jews, but all of us try to come to terms with the problem of the righteous who suffer. Job is a universal human being. God's call to him out of the whirlwind is God's call throughout the world to the righteous who try to understand the meaning of their fate.

The God who loved Abraham – “But you, Israel My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, seed of Abraham the one I love” – loves all people. For He is the Creator of the world. Adam and Eve were His first creations and they are created long before the first Jews. They are created in “the image of God,” as are all of their children to eternity. Only the human creation is in the divine image.

God created the world with only one original being, the Talmud says, to teach that everyone who destroys a single soul, it is as if he had destroyed the whole world. And everyone who saves a single soul, it is as if he had saved the whole world. And it teaches the concept of peace in the world, such that no one should say: my father is greater than your father.

“Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel out of the land of Egypt? And the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir?” All are God’s people.

When Abraham raises the issue of divine justice and mercy with God, he argues on behalf of the people of Sodom, a wicked group. Abraham frames his challenge to God in terms of God acting justly. The innocent should not suffer. And the challenge is not made as a result of any special relation that devolves from the covenant God has made with the Jews. Rather, the Bible assumes that there is a divine justice and mercy that prevail throughout the entire world. Mercy and justice reign because the God of Creation is the God of mercy and justice throughout the world.

When Amos asks that “justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream,” it is because there is a God of the whole world who calls it to justice. When Isaiah rhetorically asks what the meaning of religious fasting is, he answers that God wishes human beings to “loose the chains of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring the poor, who are cast out, to your house? When you see the naked, that you cover him; and that you hide not yourself from your own flesh?”

Judaism assumes that all people are obligated to observe a universal law. That law, spoken of as the Seven Noahide Commandments, is applicable to all human beings. These laws are: (1) the establishment of courts of justice so that law will rule in society, and the prohibitions of (2) blasphemy, (3) idolatry, (4) incest, (5) bloodshed, (6) robbery, and (7) eating the flesh of a living animal.

The fact of the covenant notwithstanding, Maimonides and subsequent decisors all make it clear that “the pious of all the nations of the world have a place in the world to come.”

Therefore, in Judaism, the absolute value of human beings, their creation in the divine image, as well as God’s overriding concern for justice and mercy is at the basis of a universal joint community of the created, a community called to respond to the love of God by loving other human beings, by setting up the structures of society that maximize the practice of justice and mercy and by engaging unendingly in the religious quest to bring healing to the broken world.

One of the central prayers of Judaism puts it this way: “We hope in you, Lord our God, to quickly see the beauty of Your might, to cause the idols to pass away from the earth and the false gods cut down, to perfect the world into the Kingdom of the Almighty, where all flesh will call upon your name, where all the wicked of the earth will be turned to you.”

L’taken olam b’malkhut Shaddai, to perfect the world into the Kingdom of the Almighty. *Tikun ha-olam*, perfection or repairing of the world, is a joint task of the Jews and all humanity. Though Jews see themselves as living in a world that is as yet unredeemed, God wills His creatures to participate in the world’s repair.

Christians and Jews

Having examined the three-fold notion of “mission” in classical Judaism, there are certain practical conclusions that follow from it, conclusions that also suggest a joint agenda for Christians and Jews.

It should be obvious that any mission of Christians *to* the Jews is in direct conflict with the Jewish notion that the covenant itself *is* that mission. At the same time, it is important to stress that notwithstanding the covenant, there is no need for the nations of the world to embrace Judaism. While there are theological verities such as the belief in God’s unity, and practical social virtues that lead to the creation of a good society that are possible and necessary for humanity at large to grasp, they do not require Judaism in order to redeem the individual or society. *The pious of all the nations of the world have a place in the world to come.*

Just as important, however, is the idea that the world needs perfection. While Christians and Jews understand the messianic hope involved in that perfection quite differently, still, whether we are waiting for the messiah – as Jews believe – or for the messiah’s second coming – as Christians believe – we share the belief that we live in an unredeemed world that longs for repair.

Why not articulate a common agenda? Why not join together our spiritual forces to state and to act upon the values we share in common and that lead to repair of the unredeemed world? We have worked together in the past in advancing the cause of social justice. We have marched together for civil rights; we have championed the cause of labor and farm workers; we have petitioned our government to address the needs of the poor and homeless; and we have called on our country’s leader to seek nuclear disarmament. These are but a few of the issues we Jews and Christians have addressed in concert with each other.

To hint at what we might yet do together let us look at some of the concrete ways that classical Judaism takes theological ideas and transforms them into ways of living. And, if these be stones in a pavement on which we might together walk, then we will be able to fashion a highway that is a route we share in common toward humanity’s repair and the world’s perfection.

Some Talmudic Thoughts About Repairing the World

Though the prophetic concern for the needy is well known, it should be stressed that it is in the Talmud that the specifics of doing good are laid out in such a way that they become the cornerstones of life.

Tzedakah (charity) and deeds of kindness are weighed in the balance as equal to all the commandments of the Torah. The obligation of charity is directed at the poor and deeds of kindness are directed at the poor and the rich. Charity is directed at the living and deeds of kindness are rendered to the living and to the dead. Charity utilizes one’s money while deeds of kindness utilize one’s money and one’s self.

Already in Talmudic times, charitable institutions to care for the poor were an established and essential part of the community’s life. When, for example, the Mishnah teaches that a Jew must celebrate the Passover seder with four cups of wine, it notes that the public dole (*tamhui*) must provide that wine for the poor. The poor must celebrate and feel the dignity of being free people – and that is the responsibility of the community. Yet as much as charitable institutions are a central part of the community’s life, Maimonides makes it clear that the highest form of charity is to make it possible for someone to earn a living himself.

The large section of the Talmud that deals with civil and criminal law, *Nezikin* or *Damages*, specifies and protects workers’ compensation. It gives concrete form to the Torah’s prohibitions against interest and extends the laws prohibiting interest to include many types of financial transactions that

appear to be interest, even when they are not. All this is done in order to create an economy where people are encouraged to help each other financially as an expression of their common fellowship, rather than as a way of making money. Financial instruments are created that enable people without funds to become partners with others rather than borrowers – another way of protecting human dignity and encouraging the development of a society where this dignity is manifested in everyday life.

Acts of kindness that are required and developed in detail by the law include the obligations to visit the sick and to comfort mourners. Jews are required to redeem captives and to provide for brides, to bury the dead and to welcome people to their tables. The Talmud details the obligation of Jews to show deference to the old. “Standing up” and showing special signs of respect to the old are responses to the physical problems of aging. As a person’s own sense of dignity diminishes, the community is asked to reinforce the individual’s dignity.

Of course Jewish law is directed at Jews and its primary concern is to encourage the expression of love to the members of the community. It deals not in sentiments but, principally, in actions. But it is important to note that many of these actions are mandatory toward all people. Thus the Talmud says: “One must provide for the needs of the gentile poor with the Jewish poor. One must visit the gentile sick as one visits the Jewish sick. One must care for the burial of a gentile, just as one must care for the burial of a Jew. [These obligations are universal] because these are the ways of peace.”

The Torah’s ways of peace manifest a practical response to the sacred creation of humanity in the divine image. They help perfect the world into the Kingdom of the Almighty.

Does not humanity need a common path that seeks the ways of peace? Does not humanity need a common vision of the sacred nature of our human existence that we can teach our children and that we can foster in our communities in order to further the ways of peace? Does not humanity need a commitment of its religious leadership, within each faith and beyond each faith, to join hands and to create bonds that will inspire and guide humanity to reach toward its sacred promise? For Jews and Christians who heard the call of God to be a blessing and a light to the world, the challenge and mission are clear.

Nothing less should be our challenge – and that is the true meaning of the mission which we all need to share.