



Healing The World – Working Together: Religion in Global Society

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Response to Keynote Address by Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia #13; ICCJ International Conference, Chicago, July 24-27, 2005

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Religion in Global Society

Rabbi David Rosen

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The role I have been given for this opening plenary of the conference reflects the three honors I enjoy here this evening. Firstly as Honorary President of the ICCJ and Father John Pawlikowski's predecessor as President of the ICCJ. Secondly as Director of the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee that is co-sponsoring this conference; and thirdly, having the honor to follow Dr. Sam Kobia. It is an historic event in the life of ICCJ to have him here with us and for us to hear his presentation.

While I only had the opportunity to briefly see Dr. Kobia's text today before listening to him, I naturally had given some consideration to the title of the conference – the title of his speech – the opening phrase of which was of course very familiar to me from Jewish sources. I consulted with Christian colleagues in Jerusalem, who confirmed for me that the concept "healing the world" is in itself not taken from a specific Christian theological context. The English is in fact a translation of the Hebrew term *Tikun Olam* to mean mending or healing the world – a usage that has become very familiar in contemporary Jewish circles and beyond.

I wish to reflect on the metamorphosis that this concept has undergone, because it seems to me that in doing so, there are ramifications relevant to Dr. Kobia's comments and perhaps to the most controversial aspect in his presentation, as far as Jewish-Christian relations are concerned.

What is ironic about this concept of *Tikun Olam* is that its traditional use did not at all imply the idea

that it has come to mean in our liberal enlightened Jewish circles, namely that of social activism or even of global engagement. It may in fact be seen as having indicated the opposite. In its Biblical usage the word Tikun does not mean to mend or heal. It means to put in place, to order, to regulate. At the most, it can mean to make straight, as in the phrase in Ecclesiastes (7:13) “Who can make straight that which he has bent out of shape”

The modern Hebrew usage of the word to mean to mend is taken in fact from the medieval Kabbalistic concept that was particularly developed by the famous 16th century Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari, who expounded a brilliant idea of what we might call “passive activism”. It is a concept that talks of mending the broken vessels of Creation and the problem it addresses is in fact already anticipated within classical Hebrew-Biblical prophetic literature; namely, the problem of whether we are able at our own initiative to live up to the enormous challenge of making our world the kind of place God wants us to make it be. The question of how to live up to this challenge to ensure that our world is a world of justice, of righteousness, of peace, of care for the vulnerable, for the old, for the widow, for the stranger, is rendered particularly problematic when we ourselves have to face and address conditions in which we struggle to maintain our survival and wellbeing.

So we have those prophets who did see things in relatively simple terms, like Amos. For him, it is all just a matter of doing justice. If you perform justice and righteousness, you will transform the community and society and redemption will be achieved. While for other prophets in very different conditions, like Ezekiel, it was obvious that deliverance could not come from human initiative, but required some Divine initiative, that facilitates human response accordingly. Of course, after the destruction of the Temple and the exile, this perception of reality intensified, and notably today is the 17th day of Tammuz, the Fast day that recalls the breach in the walls of Jerusalem leading to its destruction. Dispersion and oppression further intensified the abovementioned perception, but perhaps it reached its climax after the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. The Biblical idea that we can and must change our world for the better seemed so impossible when we were so marginalized, so vulnerable and faced such hostility directed towards us. Against this background Luria presented his brilliant concept of Tikun which taught the “esoteric significance of human pietistic activity, linked to the secret working of creation, integrated into a vast cosmological drama”. (G. Scholem). The idea of Tikun claims that we can bring about cosmological restitution through our own internal observance of precepts and prayer – but not through social activism and global human effort. That idea would have seemed absolutely crazy to Rabbi Luria. It is therefore an ironic paradox that this concept is used today to mean social engagement and global activism, when in fact what it really reflected was an alienation from society and a negative view of the world at large. It was a concept that was appropriate for a marginalized community, spurned, hated, without security and confidence. It provided a way of seeing how we may be able to impact on the world without actually engaging the world – precisely the opposite of the imperative behind the title of this conference, for which we aspire.

Modernity saw the Jews “return to history” – no longer marginalized, but capable of playing an increasingly full role within society. Of course the establishment of the State of Israel was an integral part of that Jewish return to history. But within open societies, of which the USA is the ultimate example – an open society the likes of which Jews could hardly have dreamed of as being feasible in the past – Jews were able to increasingly engage society at large in accordance with the fundamental moral tenets of our history and culture, our faith and its teachings; to care for the needy of all to the best of our ability, while still being able to maintain our identity, if we chose to do so.

The paradox that we face today; the terrible irony that the Jewish community faces today; is that at the beginning of the 21st century, we encounter forces that threaten once again to put us into a mental state of alienation; that once again threaten to evoke the sense of vulnerability that leads to withdrawal due to perceived hostility against us.

Of course, within the Christian world today – certainly within the Western Christian world – the classical forms of anti-Semitism are looked upon by a vast majority as a bad joke. The idea of the blood libel – that Jews would take a Christian child and slaughter that child in order to drink human blood for Passover and eat human flesh for Matza, is seen today by almost all Western Christians as a ridiculous and fantastic slander. The idea that the Jews are part of a global conspiracy is seen as the specter of a deranged mind. The fact that these ideas were part and parcel of Medieval classical Christian anti-Semitism is seen as an embarrassment, as has been implied here tonight. But tragically these ideas are not dead; they have returned with a vengeance, perhaps in more senses than one. The ideas of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the blood-libel, accusations that Jews are responsible for AIDS in the world, that they pollute the wells, cause plagues and devastation, are now coming from other sources; from a culture which in the main had not know anti-Semitism in the way it had been propagated with Christian society. Now, medieval Christian anti-Semitism has been resuscitated and given a new cloak and credibility within a substantial part of the Muslim world.

Moreover in Europe we have seen a resurgent anti-Semitism on a scale unanticipated, the likes of which we had naively thought after the Shoah would not reappear. It is good and important to hear the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches refer to the organization's 1948 statement, in the wake of the Shoah – which was of course the tragedy of the Jews, but the scandal of Christianity – condemning anti-Semitism. But what we need to hear today – more than half a century later – are condemnations of those who are continuously propagating these anti-Semitic myths and canards, the latest of which has just been spewed forth by one of the most senior clerical representatives in Saudi Arabia. We would like to have heard the condemnation of such anti-Semitism today, and still hope to hear it from world church bodies.

No less pertinent is the issue that Dr. Kobia raised, undoubtedly in total sincerity and integrity, in relation to how one responds to the challenge of conflict and peacemaking in the Middle East, more specifically in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Like other states involved in conflict, Israel does not do everything right. As many of you know, I am a founder of an organization known as Rabbis for Human Rights as is my colleague here Rabbi Ehud Bandel, the Vice-President of the ICCJ. Our organization has been critical of a number of aspects of Israeli policy. However Rabbis for Human Rights has strongly protested what we see as recent unfair criticism of Israel today by certain Christian organizations, especially when this has taken place in a political cultural atmosphere that seeks to make Israel a classical scapegoat for almost every imaginable fault in the Middle East and even beyond. The double standards that have become commonplace are astounding. To begin with, there is the matter of disproportionate focus. Anyone would think that there is no Chinese oppression of Tibetan religious culture and the Dalai Lama is free to go home. Anyone would think that there is no oppression of the Bahais in Iran, let alone all the human rights abuses in Israel's neighborhood that makes her stand out in the region as a remarkable exception as a society of law and civil rights, despite her shortcomings. Somehow it appears that for many, none of the above serious issues warrant practical action, but only the Israeli-Palestinian conflict deserves the use of sanctions.

Now I do not believe that our argument is with the right to use economic leverage in the pursuit and promotion of justice. No fair individual would claim that this is illegitimate on principle. However if this is presented in a manner that suggests that Israel alone bears responsibility for the conflict then we have every right and obligation to call it unfair. When terrorism is mentioned as a passing comment rather than a fundamental dimension of the tragic situation, there is reason for a negative reaction. The idea suggested that the 'root cause' of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in fact 'occupation' is as ludicrous as it is insulting to human memory. Have these critics completely forgotten that before 1967 there was no occupation and there was still a conflict going on? Moreover the West Bank had been taken over by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan which hardly facilitated the expression of Palestinian national rights! Yet very little criticism, if any at all, was heard from the world's Churches or anyone else then. This revisionist interpretation of history

would have people believe that the whole Israel-Palestine conflict started in 1967, and disregards the real root cause, which is hostility towards any independent Jewish presence in the Holy Land. Similarly disregarded are all the attempts on the part of Israel since the Oslo accords to extricate itself from the occupation. Yet it has been precisely the ongoing continuous violence that has prevented Israel's withdrawal and postpones the possibility of a new peaceful era. All of this is ignored.

It is right and proper that we should be concerned for the plight of Palestinian Christians who reside in the environs of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Their situation is far different from that in the Galilee where Christians do have problems, but nevertheless since 1948, generally live in good socio-economic standards and their educational levels are actually generally higher than the average among Jews in Israel. Palestinian Christians in the Jerusalem and Bethlehem areas however are caught very much between a rock and a hard place; and we may be tolerant of the fact that in order to prove their value to the Palestinian nationalist majority, they need to demonstrate how they can contribute to the nationalist cause. This is especially so for the few thousand Palestinian Protestants whose future is dependant upon their acceptance by the Muslim majority. There is no greater way they can demonstrate their value for Palestinian nationalism than by enlisting their world communities especially in the US. Accordingly spokespersons from these communities present positions which surely reflect their own pain, which we should all hear and recognize, even if they are inevitably partisan. Sometimes however they are lamentably tainted by supercessionist displacement theology which uses anti-Judaism as a tool for criticism of Israel and the glorification of the Palestinian cause, presenting the former as a tool of colonialism displacing a native population and amazingly – considering that this comes from Christian clergy – ignoring the Biblical, historical and religious bonds that bind the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland.

As I say, it is one thing to show understanding for those who come from a very difficult situation and are under pressure to demonstrate their own value and their own leverage within the context they live.

However it is quite another thing when the world outside, Western Churches in particular, adopt this propaganda, hook, line and sinker. If U.S. and international Christian bodies simply echo this kind of prejudice and misrepresentation, then they should not be surprised when fair minded persons, Jews and Christians, react vehemently.

At the heart of this misrepresentation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the failure to comprehend the difference between oppression and conflict. These are not the same thing, and if we wish to genuinely contribute to the solution of conflict in the Middle East then we have to understand the difference.

Dr. Kobia said, as if it is a given, that there can be no true justice without peace and no peace without justice.

Our sages in the Talmud, in tractate Sanhedrin, demur. In their view there is an obvious contradiction between peace and justice.

As I have mentioned, today is the 17th day of Tammuz, which in Jewish tradition begins a period of three weeks culminating in the anniversary of the destruction of the Temples. When recalling past tragedy, Jewish tradition tends to look at itself critically. Arguably the most remarkable of the different explanations that our sages give for the collapse of Jewish sovereignty and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, is that it was because the Jewish authorities based themselves on a strict implementation of the law of justice. Purely to strive for justice is not good enough they teach us. Indeed, justice alone can bring calamity! Justice can exist without peace our sages teach us, but it should not! Moreover it is not true that you cannot have peace without justice. Perhaps the Hindu caste system is a classic example where people have been prepared to

subordinate themselves to an unjust structure. However in certain times and places it was and may still be successful in maintaining peaceful relations, tranquility and order within that society. Peaceful conditions can be maintained without justice, but they should not! Our sages understood that there is often an inherent conflict between these two fundamental sacred values of justice and peace, and therefore they ask where do justice and peace meet? They meet, they answer, in compromise. Of course they are not talking about a situation of oppression, but about a situation where both parties claim that theirs is a just claim. When there are two legitimate claims for justice, peace can only be facilitated through compromise.

It is essential to understand this difference between oppression and conflict. Oppression was seen in situations such as in South Africa where a minority intentionally denied a majority its civil human liberties. Oppression is when a culture like Tibet is uprooted and prevented from flourishing in its ancestral homeland. Oppression is when Iranian Bahais are prevented from freedom of worship and practice in their own country.

Territorial conflicts are situations in which each party believes that it has a just claim. In such situations there is no exclusive justice, and for such situations peace requires some kind of compromise.

Those who really want to help bring peace in the Middle East, need to understand that in this conflict (as in most conflicts) all the parties see themselves as victims of injustice and all see themselves as vulnerable. We just see ourselves in different paradigms. Palestinians see themselves as vulnerable in the face of Israeli power. Israel sees itself as vulnerable in the face of Arab hostility all around it in which Palestinian terrorism serves as a fifth column as part of a policy more than a hundred years old to eliminate what is portrayed as a foreign presence with the body politic of the Arab Muslim world. (I might add that the Arab Muslim world also sees itself as a victim - of imperial powers, colonialism, globalization, consumerism, whatever - you name it.)

In such a context, to point the finger accusingly at one side without showing understanding of its position and needs; to ignore the security and dignity of any one party; is to fail to truly contribute to peaceful reconciliation.

Many of you are familiar with the Hassidic story of the Rabbi who claimed that he learnt the real meaning of Leviticus 19:18 from two peasants. One said to the other: Ivan, do you love me? Ivan said: Vladimir, of course I love you. Vladimir said: Ivan, do you know what causes me pain? Ivan said: Vladimir, how can I know what causes you pain? Vladimir said to Ivan: Ivan, if you do not know what causes me pain – how can you truly love me?

If we really claim that we care for the parties involved in conflict, then it is our duty, our solemn duty, to seek to understand what gives the other pain. We can only really contribute to peace in situations of territorial conflict, if we can give the different parties to the conflict the sense that we really care for them; the sense that we hear their pain; the sense that we wish to be engaged for their well-being.

It is unfortunately widely assumed, that in order to be able to promote the well-being of one side to a conflict you have to somehow denigrate the other. That is the zero sum mentality that only compounds conflict. But what we need in the Middle East and what every territorial conflict in the world needs if it is to be truly resolved, is a win-win mentality – a mentality in which all parties concerned are given a sense that their own claims and their own dignity are valued. To do this, means truly “working together” as the title of this conference puts it – working together as different religious communities caring for the different parties to the conflict, and to work together with the different parties to the conflict themselves.

Dr. Kobia had spread out before us an enormous spectrum of challenges that face us today, and I

can not of course do justice to it all. I have spent my time focusing on this one particular aspect which clearly burns passionately within the Jewish community and amongst all those who care for our well-being. But in the course of his remarks he referred to a book which has just been published, which I am proud to say has been made possible by the generosity of the American Jewish Committee's Harriet and Robert Heilbrunn Institute for International Interreligious Understanding. We have contributed to that particular publication precisely because of our profound commitment to dialog understanding and cooperation. However those meetings of formal representative bodies of the Jewish community with the World Council of Churches do not take place any more. The last one in English which provided the papers that make up much of that book, took place seven to eight years ago, and why is that? It is because there has been a breakdown in trust. There has been a sense of alienation which on the Jewish side has been the result of a perception of disproportionate hostility towards Israel compounded today by a sense that there is little or no response to resurgent anti-Semitism. Moreover, while I reiterate our need to respect Christian solidarity with their brothers and sisters in the Middle East, I lament the fact that it is often accompanied by a lack of sagacity and wisdom to discern what will really serve the well-being of the Palestinian community. The latter's interests will not be achieved through increasing the alienation of the Jewish community or of the State of Israel. On the contrary, that will simply lead to a greater withdrawal; less communication and cooperation; which will ultimately be bad for Palestinians as well as for Israel and will only compound the conflict.

If we really wish to contribute to making the world a better place: then, as the title of this conference indicates, we have to work together; we have to consult with one another. One of the major sources of the disappointment within our community in relation to positions taken by certain Protestant denominations and especially the W.C.C. concerning the Middle East conflict – was that there was no prior consultation with Jewish interlocutors, in marked distinction I may say, to relations with the Catholic Church.

However to have had Dr. Kobia here with us at this gathering tonight to address us has been very important, and I hope and pray that it is a sign of a new spirit of engagement and consultation with the Jewish community – an engagement based on genuine caring and out of the desire to be able to hear the pain of one another. It is only when we will be able to do so, that we will be able really to work together, not just for a resolution of conflict or an amelioration of it within the Middle East, but for all the myriad of principles and obligations that he has referred to that our common Biblical legacy and respective religious responsibilities demand of us.

In parallel we in the Jewish community have to be careful not to allow the factors to which I have referred above, to alienate us; to cause us to withdraw from engagement with any Christian community, let alone to withdraw from our ethical obligations towards society at large.

To begin with it is clear that most Christians do not share the positions of those political activists in their denominations who have pushed various unbalanced resolutions through Council and Synod meetings.

We furthermore owe it to our remarkable friends and colleagues in these denominations who often battle valiantly for more reasonable voices to prevail, that we do not walk away. To do so will not only be of no service to ourselves, it will let them down unforgivably.

Above all however, are the values of our Heritage that demand of us to do all we can to pursue the principles of justice and righteousness; respect for all human beings and responsibility for the Creation of which we are a part. Moreover the Talmud (TB, Gittin 59b) declares that the whole of the Torah – all of Judaism – is for the sake of peace, as it is written in Proverbs (3:17): 'Her ways are pleasant ways and all her paths lead to peace.' If one's Judaism does not lead one to promote peace and a more positive, healthy, repaired and improved world – there is something fundamentally wrong with one's Judaism.

Maimonides in codifying that principle (Yad, Hilchot Melachim 10:12), adds another verse from Psalms (145:9) 'Behold, God is good to all and His mercies extend to all His creatures.' Why does Maimonides add this verse? Because he is simply telling us that the promotion of peace in our world is itself the goal of Imitatio Dei – emulating the Divine Attributes. Just as God's mercies extend to all His creatures, so we must extend our mercies to all creatures. If we are not engaged in making a better world, we fail our responsibility, our most holy responsibility, to be God-like.

Moreover if we are true to our most sublime values then we have the duty to work together with those who share them; to be greater than the sum of our different parts. To fail to do so is to betray those values.

Furthermore, as the late John Paul II put it so exquisitely: 'We are called as the children of Abraham to be a blessing to humankind. In order to be so we must first be a blessing to one another.'

In conclusion, in further reference to the 17th of Tammuz, let me recall the beautiful statement of the late Chief Rabbi of the Yishuv of the Jewish community in Israel Rabbi Kuk, with which many of you are familiar; in reference to the most well known Talmudic explanation for the destruction of Jerusalem; namely, that Jerusalem was destroyed because of groundless hatred.

Rabbi Kuk said: 'If Jerusalem was destroyed by groundless hatred, Jerusalem will only be rebuilt through groundless love'. Only when we can truly see the Divine Image in the other; in all others, each and every one created by our One Father, will we be able to overcome the pain, the suspicion, and those misinterpretations which we may all be guilty of in one way or another. We must strive thereby to bring healing and redemption, not only to Jerusalem, for all who love it and who live in it – Muslims, Christians and Jews – but to strive thereby to bring redemption for all humankind.
