



Rabbi David Meyer: 'October 7 revealed Jews' great solitude'

01.11.2024 | Olivier Bonnel

Franco-Israeli Rabbi and author David Meyer, a leading figure of the liberal Jewish movement in France, shares his reflections with Vatican News on the past year of war in Israel, recalling that beyond the differences within Judaism, the attacks waged by Hamas have an existential dimension for the Jewish people.

The last time we met Rabbi David Meyer was at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, where he teaches the history of contemporary Jewish thought. That meeting took place just a few days after the Hamas attacks on southern Israel, which had shocked an entire nation. A year later, as Israel commemorates its victims and as the war continues to expand in the region, he reflects on what has changed for Jews since October 7, 2023, the rise of antisemitism in many Western countries, and the solitude of Jews as they face a wave of violence, while attempting to outline paths to look towards the future with hope.

Q. What did October 7 represent for you as a Jew? Has the "world changed"?

For the vast majority of Jews, whether they are Israeli or not, I believe there is indeed a feeling that after October 7, the world has changed. I think what has changed is, first of all, the perception that the security we thought the State of Israel provided to its citizens and to Judaism has shattered. This is why the term "pogrom" was used—it has brought Jews back to a past reality, one we thought had been abolished by history and by the creation of the State of Israel. And this state, which was supposed to protect Jews and at least be capable of defending itself, failed in that regard. I believe, from this perspective, that the October 7 events what ensued has left a deep very deep trauma .

What also happened, perhaps more broadly for the Jewish people, is the feeling of a horrifying resurgence of antisemitism in all the countries where we live, something that is extremely difficult to understand in some way, assuming that antisemitism needs to be understood. It is part of what human societies have always experienced for so long, and we have been its victims for centuries. In some way, there is a sense that, ultimately, nothing has changed. No matter how much we are supposedly "accepted" in the countries we live in, the reality is that we feel extremely alone and hated. We feel a hatred directed at us that defies all rationality, which is absolutely incomprehensible and utterly astonishing. I think, from this perspective, there has also been a very profound change for many, many Jews around the world.

Q. Many Jews have been explaining for a year now that they are being "held accountable" for the policies pursued by Israel, by Benjamin Netanyahu. This phenomenon is not new, but it has intensified. How do we fight against this?

You know, it's very difficult to fight against antisemitism. We have been fighting against it for centuries and centuries, but we've never truly succeeded. The problem you bring up, in the way you've formulated the question itself, is that, indeed, Judaism is being held accountable for the policies of the State of Israel. What's crucial to understand, and what is difficult to explain, is the nature of the link between Judaism and the State of Israel. Because it's not about saying that all Jews always support every policy of Israel; that has never been the case, and it cannot be the

case. At the same time, there cannot be a complete disconnection between Judaism and the State of Israel.

If I may take a historical detour and go back to the 5th century, and to help Christians understand, we could refer to the Council of Chalcedon (in 451, editor's note), which stated that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, and that the fullness of one does not diminish or negate the fullness of the other.

Well, in a way, if I may use this metaphor, it's somewhat similar between Judaism and Israel. The Jewish people are not just a religion, not just Judaism; they are also a nation, an ethnicity, a history. Somehow, you cannot separate the two.

The difficulty we face is, in a way, to translate this feeling and try to make it understandable to an audience that has no particular reason to know about this subject, but to make them understand that, somehow, when Israel is attacked, Judaism is attacked. When Jews are attacked, Israel is also attacked. This does not mean that one is the absolute and total equal of the other, it simply means that the connection between the two is unbreakable, it is existential. That's why the Jewish people feel so deeply affected by the crisis we are facing today. Today, we are confronted with the difficulty of explaining the nature of this relationship, which, for many, is completely incomprehensible, and leads to all kinds of excesses, such as those we see today, particularly in the West.

Q. Do you think that to better understand this reality, this unbreakable link you speak of, is the key to first fight against ignorance?

Fighting ignorance is, in any case, always a good thing. Any solution to any conflict necessarily involves reducing ignorance and increasing knowledge, insight and the ability to think. We absolutely must do this. But there is enormous distress in the Jewish community at seeing that we are such a minority. We have seen hordes of demonstrations in Western countries, in England, on all campuses, in all universities, in the United States, in France, and everywhere, and we are not represented in that. Somehow, we don't have the tools to defend ourselves. The only thing we can do is say: "You know what? We continue to exist, we continue to exist despite everything."

I don't know how we can stop this antisemitism which, somehow, over the centuries, has always found a new way to resurge with a new face. I no longer have hope that we can defeat this antisemitism, in one form or another. The only thing we seek to do is to continue to survive. And that's already difficult. Beyond that, of course, ongoing education remains an important thing; it is even absolutely necessary. If there is a glimmer of hope somewhere, it is obviously through a refinement of thought, by fostering more critical thinking, so that people can think for themselves and not be swayed by simplistic slogans. You know, I think one of the things that disturbs us the most, in some way, is that we don't ask people to support us. But what we would have hoped for is that in Western societies, which are supposed to be societies where critical thinking has developed, we could find a way not to reduce and simplify the complex issue in which the State of Israel finds itself by dividing it into good guys and bad guys. Even that, we can't seem to find. We are absolutely crushed by the poverty of thought everywhere.

Q. How do Jewish texts help you get through these dark times?

I must confess, on a very personal level, the refuge I find in study is a true lifeline during these days of commemoration when I can no longer even bear to watch the news. In the face of the temptation of exhaustion and giving up, there is always the power of study and returning to the text. On a more universal level, to step outside my personal experience, what always strikes me in the texts of the rabbinic tradition is that they have always been grounded in real life. They are not dogmatic texts living in a dream; nor are they texts steeped in an ideology they themselves have

created. On the contrary, these are texts that engage directly with the reality of the Jewish people's experience at various moments in their history. I think there is also perhaps a message here for other religious traditions, which might have a certain tendency to spiritualize history. Spiritualizing history means, yes, maybe you have enemies, but it's not really a big deal. Maybe there is war, but actually, you don't really need to fight it. The situation is complex, but if everyone just prays for peace, that should be enough. The reality, the daily grind, the rootedness in the real world, does not allow for such an easy escape. Unfortunately, there are real enemies, there are wars that are necessary, and the horrors of war are all too real. And somehow, it is perhaps also through the study of Jewish texts that we can attempt, in some way, to share this understanding with others. But today, who wants to hear about Judaism? I believe that through these texts, we can learn what the essence of prophecy is, which is to maintain a vision for the future that does not ignore the reality of the present.

Q. Perhaps this is a naïve question, but what is the key today to bringing peace back, especially in the Middle East?

I think we need to be careful not to ask the wrong question. This might shock you, but finding peace—that is, looking for an intelligent solution that could address what reasonable people might think about the well-being of both peoples—is an extremely simple solution. Many people have found these solutions, and many ideas have emerged over the last 30 years. What is complicated—and this is where the key to the peace issue lies—is how to convince populations that no longer want to be convinced or who have never wanted to be convinced. How do we convince populations that, over the decades, have mutually radicalized each other, have mutually lost the sense of their own education and critical thinking? I believe we need to step outside the framework in which we have always thought about imagining peace. And here, I think we need a much more original, much bolder way of thinking to try and solve this equation.

Q. For a year now, there have been gestures of affection from other religions toward Jews. What is the nature of these relationships one year after the massacres of October 7th? Has interfaith dialogue changed?

Fortunately, the dialogue remains, but not with everyone. Over the past year, the Jewish community has been very disappointed by a number of stances taken by various religions, and at the same time, it has been very touched by other kinds of positions. I would just like to mention in this regard the statement made by the bishops of France a few days ago, for the commemorations of October 7th, which in some way, with perfectly chosen words, touched the hearts of the Jews. There are dialogues that persist.

The dialogue, particularly the Jewish-Christian dialogue, has shown that in 60 years, things—even those most deeply rooted in human perception—can change after almost 2,000 years of a harsh history. I think the reality of what has been achieved between Christianity, especially the Catholic world, of course, and the Jewish people, is a marker of the ability to overcome what once seemed impossible. This requires courage and visionary people. We just need to listen to them.

If this dialogue can bring forth people of vision and boldness, then I think there is a message of hope here, which is like a small light in the night. And in these dark times, even a small light is a lot.

Source: [Vatican News](#).