Dabru Emet: Its Significance for the Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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David Rosen

Just over a year ago, a Jewish statement on Christians and Christianity entitled Dabru Emet – "Speak the Truth" – was published, endorsed by more than two hundred rabbis and scholars from the different streams of contemporary Judaism. Almost all of them with very few exceptions, were in fact American. (Aside from any other reasons, the fact that the statement had been prepared under the auspices of the Baltimore Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies, guaranteed its Americanocentricity.) It was advertised in the New York Times and the Baltimore Sun, and in view of the fact that the New York Times is the real contemporary American Bible! – the statement was widely seen and acknowledged.

However this is only a partial explanation for the degree of excitement that the statement generated in Christian circles, and not only in the U.S.A. Some of us were very much surprised by how strong the positive reaction was. Though I myself was a signatory to *Dabru Emet* (one of the few non-Americans), I did not consider the text to be unusually far-reaching. Indeed, in my opinion, the Jewish perspectives in the ICCJ Theology Committee's statement "Jews and Christians in Search of a Common Religious Basis for Contributing Towards a Better World", for example, go further than *Dabru Emet*. However, these comparative institutional sour grapes or questions as to why other statements are not as well known, are not so important. What is significant is the undeniable fact that *Dabru Emet* was received even in public addresses and articles by people of no less stature than Cardinals Kasper and Keeler, the Protestant scholar Walter Bruegemann and Archbishop George Carey of Canterbury, not only as a historic document, but as ushering in a new era in Christian-Jewish relations.

This response clearly revealed just how profound and unsatisfied the need in Christian circles engaged in and committed to dialogue with the Jewish community was for some public Jewish declaration of reciprocity, in response to the far reaching theological changes that had taken place over the last forty years in Christian attitudes and teaching regarding Jews and Judaism. This reaction alone, in my opinion, was in itself eloquent enough a justification and vindication of *Dabru*

Emet.

The fact that it did indeed seem to provide satisfaction to an apparent unmet need, would perhaps suggest that suspicions prevailed in Christian circles, that the attitudes very much associated with two modern Orthodox American Rabbis and thinkers of the previous generation, were nevertheless widely held within the Jewish community at large.

I refer to Rabbis Eliezer Berkowitz and J.B. Soloveitchik, who were both actually, and relevantly, refugees from Europe. Berkowitz's position was simple and consistent. The Christian world had done us too much harm for too long – having facilitated if not collaborated with the worst horrors of Jewish experience – to put the past behind us so easily. If Christians want authentic Jews to respond positively to their overtures, Christians will have to demonstrate the genuineness of their respect and good will towards the Jewish community over a few generations before a positive Jewish response will be possible.

Rabbi Soloveitchik's position was both more sophisticated and less consistent. His argument was that Jews and Christians are "two faith communities (which are) intrinsically antithetic" and that it is not possible to share insights that are exclusively part of one's subjective spiritual experience. Accordingly he ruled out any "theological" dialogue though he acknowledged that on humanitarian issues such as war and peace, poverty, freedom, morality, civil rights and the threat of secularism "communication among the various faith communities is desirable and even essential." It has been suggested that Soloveitchik was actually trying to give a permissive ruling to enable modern Orthodox participation in Jewish-Christian meetings at all! This may have been the case. Yet Soloveitchik's ruling is definitely interpreted today restrictively and not permissively.

Moreover, whatever his motive may have been, in the relevant article (*Tradition*, Vol. 6, 1964) Soloveitchik provided and revealed his rationale behind this position. It emerged out of his own profound sense of alienation in the world – a perception which was central to his existential approach to life. He may well herein have reflected the mind-set of many Orthodox Jews in this regard, though I suspect that paradoxically it would resonate primarily with an Orthodoxy that does not call itself "modern", on the contrary. He described the relationship between Jews and Christians as the relationship of "the few and weak vis-?-vis the many and the strong" and indeed appealed to friends within the Christian "community of the many" to respect "the right of the community of the few to live, create and worship in its own way, in freedom and with dignity." Soloveitchik thus revealed that his fears were the traditional Jewish trepidations born out of past bad experience. Begin with theological dialogue and it will soon become polemic or at least an unconscious vehicle for the strong and many to impose themselves upon, and even undermine, the weak and few!

An effective critique of this position was provided already in an article in 1977 by the late Orthodox Jewish scholar Professor Zvi Yaron. Yaron questioned the legitimacy of such a perspective in the contemporary context, especially as Soloveitchik himself acknowledged "the threat of secularism" which is really the dominant contemporary ethos in Western society. Today, in the West particularly, all religions are minorities and are vulnerable (though that vulnerability and minority status actually has its own empowerment). Above all, however, Yaron criticized Soloveitchik's complete omission of any reference at all to the State of Israel, which indeed is strange given Soloveitchik's unquestionable commitment to it. To be sure, the fulfillment of the Zionist vision that has placed the Jewish people in a very different position in our world, undermines the very basis of Soloveitchik's perspective. Yaron effectively criticized Soloveitchik's theological exclusivity, through exposing the contemporary inappropriateness of the terminology and categories that Soloveitchik used to promote his thesis.

However, the position may also be criticized for its ontological self-contradiction. As the Prophet Malachi points out (ch. 3 v. 16), even when people of faith just talk to each other, it is of theological

consequence! It is artificial and simply incorrect to suggest that in addressing issues of humanitarian concern we are not concerning ourselves with "doctrinal, dogmatic or ritual aspects of our faith." If we do not oppose entirely the deepening of positive Jewish-Christian relations, but on the contrary wish to encourage these, then inevitably we are in the business of exchanging and sharing theological insights and affirmations even in the midst of addressing common humanitarian concerns and we would do well to approach these seriously rather than play games pretending to be "outside" as it were, when we are already engaged in dialogue.

Dabru Emet certainly demonstrated the unequivocal repudiation of such negative attitudes towards Jewish-Christian dialogue by the widest cross section of Jewish religious and academic leadership. As obvious as this was to those of us in the Jewish community engaged in this field, evidently it had not been so to very many of our Christian collaborators, and as I say, that in itself gave the statement great value.

The Christian excitement in effect related firstly to the fact that this public Jewish statement recognized Christians and Christianity today as not being the same as they were in the past; that Christianity today is not only no longer principally a threat to Judaism, but in fact is substantially an ally. It also related to the fact that the statement recognizes a Jewish interest not only in a social and moral relationship with Christianity, but also in a relationship of theological understanding between the two. In effect Dabru Emet represents a Jewish willingness not to forget, but to put behind us the unique tragic past that bedevilled the Jewish-Christian relationship and to look forward to a unique fraternal theological interaction in the future. Indeed, the statement was criticized in certain Jewish quarters precisely on both these grounds.

There are those who, while they do not share Berkowitz’s rejectionism, do believe that the declaration lets Christianity off the hook too easily, too early. These reservations focus on the passage in *Dabru Emet* that rejects the idea of laying the blame for past Christian antisemitism and anti-Judaism at the door of contemporary Christians (an ironic reversal of Christian charges against Jews!) and declares that "Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon," even if it succeeded to the extent it did, as a result of Christian anti-Semitic attitudes. The passage goes on to declare that "if the Nazi extermination of the Jews had been more successful, it would have turned its murderous rage more directly to Christians."

One may dispute the latter statement, although already in his book "The Great Hatred" published in 1941, the renowned American Jewish writer Maurice Samuel had argued that the Nazi venom against the Jews was in effect the expression of its hostility towards the essence of Christianity itself. However I do not believe that a fair minded person could dispute the central thesis that Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon in and of itself. Of course, if this had been a Christian statement, then we would have expected some extensive soul searching and greater acknowledgement of the sin of Christian antisemitism. But *Dabru Emet* is a Jewish statement that is explicitly directed at Jews. The Jewish community does not need persuading as to the case of Christian historic guilt and responsibility for antisemitism – on the contrary! As a modern Jewish leader in the dialogue with Christianity has put it, the Jewish community often tends to indulge in a "triumphalism of pain." Inevitably then one concludes, that the Jewish criticism of this clause is motivated by what I described above as an unwillingness to let contemporary Christians off the historical hook.

I would consider this a Jewish "hang-up" (if you’ll excuse the pun, on hooks and hang-ups) – perhaps legitimate (after all, antisemitism is still very much a reality), but nevertheless still a "hang-up", because it allows subjective historical experience/pain to be the moral criterion and arbiter, rather than individual responsibility. (Of course, the motive could be far worse – namely, a desire to nurture in order to manipulate Christian guilt!)

The other main Jewish criticism of *Dabru Emet* has focused on the theological affirmation of

Christianity, especially the phrase "Jews and Christians worship the same God."

We might at the outset point out that Judaism – or certainly the Hebrew Bible – does not engage in theological speculation; does not contain a catechism; nor does it even make doctrine a determinant factor in worship. Indeed, to serve or worship God is defined precisely as "walking in His ways", "observing His commandments". In other words, the basic criterion for determining whether we worship God or not, is our religio-ethical conduct. Moreover the unique Divine self-designation in the book of Exodus "I am that which I am" or more literally, "I shall be that which I shall be," has been understood precisely to mean that no two people have the same conception of the Divine. Indeed, even within any one tradition and denomination one will find very differing perceptions of the Deity. Sometimes there are serious divergences if not conflicts over such understandings. Rabbi Shlomo MinHahar of Provence, for example, considered certain of the theological principles of Maimonides to be heretical. But neither intended that the other did not worship the same God. Similarly, within my own contemporary Jewish Orthodoxy there are colleagues of mine who maintain theological conceptions that I find unacceptable, but I do not think that they are worshipping another Deity! Certainly our faiths have defined limits to pluralism and theological diversity, but it is actually not at all necessarily contradictory to affirm that someone worships the same God and at the same time contend that the other's perception of the Deity is problematic and/or flawed.

Moreover, those who have criticized this phrase in *Dabru Emet* appear to have ignored the dominant view of "chachmei Ashkenaz," the medieval rabbinic sages in Christian lands, that even though Christian faith affirmations compromise pure monotheism, this does not prevent them from co-existing with Judaism's truth affirmations, i.e. these ideas do not make Christianity idolatrous. Moreover some of the most preeminent rabbis in their times, such as Menachem HaMeiri, Moses Rivkes, Jacob Emden, Elijah Benamozegh, and Israel Lifschitz, viewed Christianity not only as ethical monotheism, but attested to the religio-ethical redemptive role of Christianity in human society – often in language and ideas far more bold than in *Dabru Emet*. Indeed, in stating that Christianity has brought "hundreds of millions of people… into relationship with the God of Israel" and has led them to "accept the moral principles of Torah," *Dabru Emet* simply echoes statements within the writings of the aforementioned Rabbinic authorities and many others over the course of the last millennium.

Perhaps the most far reaching call of *Dabru Emet* is for Jews "to respect Christians' faithfulness to their revelation" (which incidentally is an almost verbatim quote of Martin Buber's words in his article "The Two Foci of the Jewish Soul" published in 1948). This expression of theological respect and its dialogic implications would seem to highlight a principal source of Christian excitement over *Dabru Emet*. In effect, the excitement reflects a perceived development of a Jewish theology of Christianity. In this regard, it might be more correct to describe *Dabru Emet* less as the substance and more as a sign.

As indicated, a positive theological understanding of Christianity is not a new thing. It was arguably Emden who was the most far reaching of rabbinic authorities in this regard. In addition to acknowledging Jesus' commitment to Torah and his mission to strengthen that commitment within the people of Israel, he also expresses appreciation of the fact that through the message of Jesus' ministry, Christianity has brought about the widespread elimination of idolatry. However, Emden goes far further in describing Christianity in the language of the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot as "*knessiah leshem shamayim*", i.e. a gathering for the sake of Heaven. (However the Hebrew word "knessiah" is also used precisely to mean "Church"!). Such a body is described by the Mishnah as being of permanent value, sanctifying the Divine Name. Emden accordingly portrays Christianity in terms of Divine purpose and value.

Indeed a serious Jewish theology of Christianity will need to go further than simply respecting "Christians' faithfulness to their revelation"; it requires an understanding of the significance of that

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revelation in terms of the Divine plan for humanity. It may be said that in the early twentieth century, Jewish philosophers – most notably Franz Rosenzweig and to a lesser degree Martin Buber – sought to develop this idea further; but it was still on the basis of viewing Christianity as the Divine message to the gentiles, rather than offering any insight that could be of any value for Judaism.

However the remarkable strides in Jewish-Christian relations over the last four decades have produced a new openness to such. These have included seeing Judaism and Christianity in a mutually complementary role in which the Jewish focus on the communal covenant with God and the Christian focus on the individual relationship with God, may serve to balance one another. Others have seen the complementary relationship in that Christians need the Jewish reminder that the Kingdom of Heaven has not yet fully arrived, while Jews need the Christian awareness that in some ways that Kingdom has already rooted itself in the here and now. Another view of the mutual complementarity portrays Judaism as a constant admonition to Christianity regarding the dangers of triumphalism, while Christianity's universalistic character may serve an essential role for Judaism in warning against degeneration into insular isolationism. As opposed to the underlying assumptions of the latter, is the contention that it is actually Christianity's universalism that jars with a culturally pluralistic reality in the modern world. The communal autonomy that Judaism affirms may serve more appropriately as a model for a multicultural society, while Christianity may provide a better response for individual alienation in the modern world.

In addition, Jewish as well as Christian theologians have written about the mutual theological assistance Jews and Christians can provide one another in overcoming the burdens of history. It has also been pointed out that Jewish-Christian reconciliation itself has impacted on society well beyond the bilateral dialogue. Accordingly it serves both as a universal paradigm of reconciliation and should serve as an inspiration for Jews and Christians for dialogue, especially with Islam and even beyond in the multifaith encounter.

Indeed, as mentioned earlier, even the widespread acceptance that our shared ethical values and moral responsibilities demand our cooperation and collaboration – today more than ever before as we face the challenges provided by the dominant secular culture in which all religions are minorities – has theological implications for our relationship. Pope John Paul II has expressed this beautifully when he observed that "Jews and Christians are called (as the Children of Abraham) to be a blessing for humankind. In order to be so, we must first be a blessing to one another". What then are the theological implications of such mutual blessing?

All these ideas reflect the real theological challenge that we who labour in love in this vineyard of Jewish-Christian relations are called to address with increasing candor and depth.

How may we understand not only each other's integrity as each defines one's self, but furthermore understand each other's role accordingly in the Divine plan for humanity and understand our relationship in these terms? What is God saying to us in this regard and how may we benefit from one another – indeed becoming a blessing to one another in the deepest sense possible?

Perhaps then the excitement with which *Dabru Emet* was received, reflected the fact that there is now a genuine search for answers to these questions within both communities.

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