



Judaism Meets Christianity for the First Time - Again

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Rabbi Irving Greenberg (New York) discusses the significance of Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity, which he hails as 'a historical pioneering gesture.'

Judaism Meets Christianity

for the First Time — Again

By Irving Greenberg

With the publication of "[Dabru Emet](#)," for the first time in more than 1,900 years, important leaders in Judaism and Christianity face each other, seeing each other as servants of the same God, even as members of a covenanted people, whatever the unresolved differences between them. The religious transformation that generated "A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity" is mind boggling; its roots go back more than two millennia.

In the first century, the Jewish people went through the greatest tragedy of its history (up until the 20th century) – the destruction of the Second Holy Temple. During the long exile from the Land of Israel that followed, the rabbis shaped and reshaped Judaism. The transformed religion accomplished an almost unbelievable feat – sustaining a landless, persecuted minority through a stunning range of historical vicissitudes.

In that first, tumultuous century, a small band of Jews took up with a remarkable, if obscure, Jewish teacher. They made little headway among Jews, but when they turned to preach to gentiles, they achieved a sensational level of acceptance – and in the process, their doctrines, beliefs, and practices were transformed into the religion known as Christianity.

After Christianity triumphed among gentiles, the deep-rootedness of this faith in the Jewish Bible and tradition paradoxically drove it toward unrelenting hostility to Jewry. As believing Jews, the original Christians drew religious authority and values from biblical Judaism – an earlier version of the Judaism practiced at that time. Since they derived religious authority from earlier Judaism, the Christians became rivals of Jewry, fighting for control of the very understanding of the Jewish tradition and its claims.

Christians had to answer a burning question: If the vast majority of the original Jews who knew Jesus personally did not accept the faith now preached in his name, did this not undermine Christianity's religious claims? Christians could have repudiated Judaism and its religious texts. But to their credit, mainstream Christians clung to the validity of the Abrahamic covenant, thereby upholding the eternity of God's promises. However, they could not conceive that God was reaching out pluralistically – meaning God's word was revealed to Jews through Judaism, and to

gentiles through Christianity. Rather, in their understanding, either Judaism or Christianity was the true continuation of the past, and the other faith was therefore an imposter.

Christians resolved to win the conflict by de-legitimizing Jews and Judaism. Did Jews reject Jesus? The Christian explanation was that Jews were made arrogant by their experience of being the chosen people; they were spiritually blind and religiously decadent. Jews "missed" the new message and instead lived a life of legalism and empty rituals and deeds. Over the years, Jewish behavior was colored even more darkly: Jews were portrayed as Christ killers, a people guilty of deicide; they were children of the devil who practiced ritual child murders, and so forth. The Christian choices devolved into converting the Jews, expelling them, or in various outbursts, killing them. The "nice guy" Christian version was to ghettoize Jews, treat them like pariahs, make them suffer but keep them alive, until the Jews finally repented and became Christians.

Judaism reciprocated the teaching of contempt. Christianity was dismissed as a religion practiced by morally and culturally inferior gentiles, based on unbelievable claims (God-in-the-flesh, virgin births), degenerating into idolatry (either in the statues of saints or in the representations of the incarnation of God in Jesus). Kindred faiths became enemies. Henceforth, the two religions talked past each other, and viewed each other as the enemy.

It took an extraordinary concert of forces to transform this implacable hostility. One factor was modern culture disseminating the principles of equality and dignity of all people. It became harder to preach contempt for another people and treat its religion as inherently inferior without losing one's own credibility in a culture of universal human dignity.

The second force was the shocking Holocaust, with its devastating blow to all religious faith, compounded in Christianity's case by the implication that Christian teachings had set the Jews up for this terrible cruelty and genocide. The tragedy unleashed a torrent of Christian self-criticism. Christian churches exhibited increasing willingness to confront and revise classic teachings that encouraged hatred for others, Judaism first and foremost. Ironically, Christian self-correction was a statement of Christianity's spiritual vitality – prophetic self-criticism is a mark of religious strength.

The third force was the growing power of secularism, which was eroding all religious claims. Many spiritual leaders concluded that it was more important to form religious alliances to battle secularism, materialism, and anomie than to fight and wound each other. The outcome was a growing dialogue among religions, leading to listening and learning from each other.

In the Jewish–Christian dialogue, the articulation of the new Christian respect for Judaism necessarily came first. Christian claims of superceding Judaism were at the heart of the religion. Negative stereotypes were ensconced in the New Testament itself and led to systematic persecution of the Jews in Christian and, later, secular societies. The attitude of the Jewish minority had much less severe consequences.

Still, the very process of dialogue, with its inherent two-way communication, inevitably led to a new Jewish appreciation of Christianity's positive qualities. Personal witness, for instance. Under the goad of the Holocaust, I entered the Jewish-Christian dialogue to demand that Christians stop spreading hate toward Jews through pretext of a Gospel of Love. I came to scold, but under the impact of meeting repentant Christians and hearing their religious testimony, I stayed to praise Christianity for its exemplary self-purification and for the vitality of its religious life.

Now we have "A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity," the most positive affirmation of Christianity ever made by a committed Jewish group. It states unequivocally that Christians worship the God of Israel and legitimately draw on the Hebrew Bible – our contradictions notwithstanding. The statement affirms Christian ethics and praises the possibility of a Judaic-Christian partnership for justice and peace. It assesses Christian guilt in the Holocaust while

correctly separating Christianity from Nazism.

The writers have had the courage to overrule the fear of increased assimilation, intermarriage, and Christian missionary activity because of such positive statements. This declaration will be resisted by Orthodox and other traditional Jews who have opposed theological dialogue and still internalize Jewish rejection of Christianity's past claims. It will be resisted by many secular Jews whose residual Jewish memory triggers a knee-jerk reaction of fear and anger at Christianity. Both these groups carry the unhealed wounds of the past two millennia. This statement may be abused by Christian fundamentalists to advance missionary efforts, or it may frighten them off, for its subtext is a pluralist affirmation of Judaism's eternal covenant – which most traditional Christians cannot yet imagine.

Still, this statement is a historic, pioneering gesture. Ironically, this affirmation of Christianity shows that Judaism's vitality is undiminished; it too can self-correct. Ultimately, the touchstone of Judaism's integrity in response to the Holocaust is whether it can purge itself of attitudes that promulgate hatred and whether it can neutralize classic texts that may generate contempt for others. If Jews and Christians can overcome centuries of distrust, anger, and hatred, what a testimony it is to the power of purification and peace that they carry within themselves. Surely the God of Israel and the world, whose will it was (I believe) to reach out to gentiles directly (though not exclusively) through a Jew named Jesus, will be pleased.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg is the President of Jewish Life Network (JLN). © Copyright 2000

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