



50 Years of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue -- The Way Forward

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At recent conferences in Toronto, Canada (sponsored by several local groups), and in Utrecht, the Netherlands, (sponsored by the Catholic Council for Church and Judaism) I was asked to offer a response to 50 years of "The Dialogue" since Nostra Aetate, not the response of the Jewish community but just my response, as a rabbi, Jewish educator and activist who has been involved in dialogue and action for the past quarter century.

There is no question that the document Nostra Aetate ("In our Time") -- promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in October 1965 -- changed the discourse in the field of Jewish-Christian dialogue in particular, and interreligious dialogue in general, in the contemporary period. I explained this clearly in a film called *I am Joseph Your Brother* which was produced in 2001 by the organization which I founded and directed for 24 years -- The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel. We made this film following the visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel in March 2000.

In this film I said, "We have moved from persecution to partnership, from confrontation to cooperation, from diatribe to dialogue". Let me explain.

Not only did this famous document Nostra Aetate open up a new dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Jewish People, but it initiated a dialogue between the Catholic Church and other religions, including and especially Islam, as I will discuss in more detail below. Indeed, it made dialogue between leaders and followers of the major monotheistic religions "kosher" (i.e., legitimate) and mainstream.

It is now accepted practice for leaders of religious communities at all levels to be in dialogue with each other in many places in the world and to work together in common cause wherever possible to heal the world. It is fair to say that this is a direct result of the major shift in policy of the Catholic Church, which was expressed in Nostra Aetate, and which subsequently influenced many other contemporary church movements to rethink their relationships to Judaism, Israel and other religions, their leaders and followers.

This is also the case in Israel, where I have lived and worked for the past 36 years. Interreligious dialogue is part of the landscape, an essential part of our common life, although it has not yet reached the masses (nor has it reached the masses in most countries!). It is vital for our present state of being and for our relations in the future.

Since I have now mentioned the future, I want to say near the outset of this blog post that I will focus on the future, rather than the past. Much has been written about the many new positive developments in Jewish-Catholic relations over the past 50 years, about all the documents that have been written and promulgated. A great deal of progress has been made! It is quite amazing, even unprecedented. Now it is time to look towards the future and think about the challenges that face us as we look forward to the next 50 years.

In short, one of my main messages today is this: we need to focus on cooperation and action partnerships for the betterment of all humanity, and not only on "dialogue" and discussions. We

need to heal the world together, what we Jews call Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World). This ought to be the outcome of genuine dialogue, and this certainly should be a new emphasis for us for the years ahead.

With this said, one of the most important and still neglected areas of our work for the future should be in the area of EDUCATION.

The number one problem that we face is ignorance. After all these years, our lay people -- Jewish and Christian -- still don't know very much about each other. Too much of the dialogue has been restricted to the leaders and the hierarchy. Accordingly, we still need a multi-faceted, sustained and systematic educational program in many and diverse settings: schools, seminaries, teacher-training schools and universities, in the curricula of Jewish and Catholic schools, in newspapers and magazines, in scholarly journals, in conferences and workshops, in formal and informal education, in dialogues and seminars, and through the media. The film "I am Joseph Your Brother", and its accompanying Learning Resource/Study Guide, is one way to do this.

There have been many historic statements and documents on Jews and Judaism made by the Church during the past 50 years. The truth is that Christian church movements -- both Catholic and Protestant -- have done much more to educate their people about Jews and Judaism than we Jews have done about Christians and Christianity. This is, no doubt, due to the asymmetrical nature of Jewish-Christian history, and the fact that Judaism is more integral to Christianity than the reverse. In any event, the Catholic Church has felt the imperative to change their curricula, and we Jews have not, at least not yet. In my humble opinion, this cannot continue this way.

In the future, it ought to be unacceptable for Jews to continue to teach about Catholics -- or Christians in general -- in a pre-Vatican Two way, just as it would be inconceivable for Christians to teach about Jews in a pre-Zionist or pre-Israel fashion. We Jews -- in the Diaspora and in Israel -- will have to do much more in the future to educate our communities about the revolutionary changes in Christian thinking concerning Jews and Judaism that have occurred in recent decades.

Moreover, for a long time, I have felt that the dialogue was more about "community relations" than about actually learning from each other. In my view, this too has to change. We need to develop a genuine interreligious dialogue; a dialogue based on mutuality, and the existential need to learn about each other and from each other towards the practical end of finding better ways to live together in the years ahead.

Our dialogue in the future needs to be more reciprocal, with both sides taking responsibility for improving relations with the other religions within their own communities. This new era of reciprocity will inevitably lead us into theological territory. We need not be afraid of this. We need to learn about each other's basic beliefs -- as is increasingly being done in new dialogues, seminars and conferences in recent years -- if we really intend to understand one another and be able to live together in peaceful coexistence.

(This post is part one of a two-part series on this topic; part two will be published on JCR on April 1st)

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