



Response to Cardinal Walter Kasper's Lecture

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Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish (Jerusalem) responds to Cardinal Walter Kasper's address at the Israel Museum. Jerusalem, 21 November, 2001

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at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 21 November, 2001 on

"The Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Foundations, Progress, Difficulties and Perspectives" *

Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish

At Cardinal Kasper's request, I offer some brief responses to his words of wisdom. I will respond in four parts, reminiscent of the four questions, or the four answers, of the Passover Haggadah:

1. Combating the problem of ignorance through education

The number one problem that we face is *ignorance*. After all these years, we still don't know very much about each other. Accordingly, we 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, magazines and newspapers, in conferences and workshops, in formal and informal education, in dialogues and seminars, and through the media.

Cardinal Kasper reviewed some of the history of Catholic statements on Jews and Judaism made by the Church during the past 35-40 years. The truth is that the Church has done much more to educate their people about Jews and Judaism than we Jews have done about Christians and Christianity. They have felt the imperative to do so, and we have not. At least not yet. It can not continue this way.

It is impossible for Jews to continue to teach about Catholics – or Christians in general – in a pre-Vatican II way, just as it would be inconceivable for Catholics 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 on Jews and Judaism in recent decades.

2. Obstacles to the Dialogue

There will be obstacles to the Dialogue -- His Eminence referred to some of them during his lecture:

- *Understanding better the period of the Holocaust.* If the document *We Remember* is not the

last word on this subject, then this means that we will need to continue to confront this subject together in serious and substantive ways. It will not go away. It is too central to the Jewish psyche and soul. Therefore, we will need to ask: Will there be further Catholic reflections on the Shoah? When? What kind of reflections? Historical? Theological? Educational? What will be the next steps?

- *The need for opening up the Vatican Archives to ascertain historical truth.* Cardinal Kasper repeated tonight the commitment of the Catholic Church, which he made last August, to consent to the access of the Vatican Archives as soon as the reorganizing and cataloguing work is concluded. This needs to be heard in the Jewish world. The Holy See now agrees to open its archives. It is no longer a question of whether, but when. We can only hope that this will be sooner rather than later.
- *The potential beatification of certain popes of the past* is a serious issue casting a giant shadow over the dialogue in the present as well as for the future. History continues to haunt us.

But, I believe that we should not focus only on the obstacles. This has too often been the case in recent years. This is what the newspapers want to hear. This makes the news, but it is not the essence of our dialogue. We should not allow ourselves to be mired in the past. As we pursue historical study – and we will need to find a way to do this which will be agreeable to both sides of the dialogue – we need to move forward with our dialogue, in the serious and systematic way that Cardinal Kasper outlined for us today.

Despite the existence of well-known issues of contention – and some definite differences of opinion as to how to ascertain truth, especially about the past – we need to continue to talk with one another. Indeed, I would argue that one of the great achievements of the dialogue in the past 40 years is that we can now talk with each other – honestly, openly and constructively – about the issues that concern our two faith communities in ways that were inconceivable in the past.

3. How to move forward

We need to develop a genuine *interreligious* dialogue; a dialogue based on mutuality, and the genuine desire to learn about each other and from each other.

In the past, the dialogue was all too often asymmetrical, based on our very asymmetrical history. We Jews were continually prodding the Catholics to denounce anti-Semitism (which they have now done countless times), to recognize the State of Israel (which was done formally at the end of 1993), and to issue a statement on the Shoah (which was done in March of 1998 in *We Remember*).

Only last year, did some brave and courageous Jews – mostly rabbis and academics – finally issue the "Dabru Emet" statement. This is a revolutionary statement, and more should be known about it in Israel, which is why we are having it translated into Hebrew and are planning to hold a conference about it here in May of this coming year.

This new era of reciprocity will inevitably lead us into theological territory. We need not be afraid of this. We need to study each other's central ideas, such as: creation, revelation, redemption, justice and peace, salvation and messianism, sacred place (e.g. the Land of Israel) and sacred time (the Shabbat and the holidays), universalism and particularism, and much more.... We need to study each other's texts and systems of interpretation, the way each tradition has learned to live by its sacred texts.

In so doing, we will learn what unites us and what divides us. We don't have to agree on everything. This would be superficial and simply wrong. Indeed, this is too often one of the pitfalls

of interfaith dialogue. Rather, we need to discover in which areas we are distinctive and unique and in which areas we share much in common (in what is sometimes called the "Judeo-Christian tradition").

4. Common Action/Tikkun Olam

We must take action together in areas in which we already have reached some agreement, such as ecology/environment. We share God's earth -- we are partners with God, stewards for his Creation.

And we can develop more areas of agreement on important topics, like human dignity and human rights, as well as justice and peace issues around the world. We ought to work for justice and peace side by side wherever we can. The challenge is not dialogue for dialogue's sake, but dialogue for Tikkun Olam, for repairing the world.

In our part of the world, this is more important than ever before. Religion – and religious leaders -- have a very bad reputation here, and for good reason. They are all too often perceived (not incorrectly) as supporting violence and terrorism, or war or occupation. We need a new voice – an alternative vision to those people see daily on their TV screens and hear on their radios – religious leaders, like His Eminence Cardinal Kasper, who will speak out loud and clear with a vision of justice and peace for all.

Dr. Ron Kronish, a rabbi and educator who has lived in Israel for the past 22 years, serves as Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel. See: Cardinal Walter Kasper's Lecture