



Christians, Jews and Anti-Semitism Now

| Marmor, Dow

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We return to the theme of Jacob and Esau. The rabbinic view that regards Jacob as the archetypal Jew and Esau as the prototype for every gentile is rooted in the biblical account of the two brothers. The account in Genesis of their reunion is pertinent to the theme of this article:

Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maids, putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. He himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, *vayishakehu*, he kissed him; and they wept. (Genesis 33:1-4)

The Masoretic text has, besides the vowels and cantillation signs, dots over each letter of the word *vayishakehu* 'he kissed him.'¹ Rashi, the medieval Jewish commentator, reflecting rabbinic tradition, wrote: "Some explain the dotting as meaning that he (Esau) did not kiss him (Jacob) with his whole heart. However, R. Simon bar Yochai said: Surely, it is well known that Esau hated Jacob, but at that moment his pity was really aroused and he kissed him with his whole heart."² In other words, the sages agreed about Esau's hatred of Jacob but differed about whether, in the moment of reunion, Esau forgot himself and showed genuine love for his brother. If so, the literal accuracy of the text could be upheld; otherwise a reinterpretation along Rashi's first suggestion, as implied in those additional dots, would be required.

Another rabbinic authority suggests we should not read the text as *vayishakehu*, 'he kissed him,' but *vayishachehu* 'he bit him.'³ Esau, the paradigmatic gentile, could not possibly kiss Jacob, the paradigmatic Jew, although they were brothers. Therefore – with a very slight change of the Masoretic text – we should assume that Esau the gentile, in fact, bit Jacob the Jew. This may be poor exegesis, but it is a telling illustration of how some Jews view the relationship between Jew and gentile.

Despite all the changes since rabbinic times, little has changed when it comes to the perception of Jews. Many are unable to distinguish between the gentile whom Esau represents and the Christian of today. Many Jews, probably the majority, are uncomfortable with, and even suspicious of,

Christian-Jewish co-operation. That is why so few show interest in it.

Christian-Jewish dialogue is of little concern to most exponents of contemporary Judaism and a stepchild of Jewish creativity in our time. But in the days of Franz Rosenzweig, Leo Baeck and other giants of twentieth-century Jewish thought, it was central. As a member of that small minority of Jews to whom the matter is of concern now, I would like to report that those engaged in interfaith dialogue today are considered at best marginal and eccentric; more often they are suspected of more sinister motives. For example, they are suspected of having a desire to win the recognition from gentiles that is denied them among Jews.

The reason for the suspicion and the lack of interest is the widespread belief among Jews that the roots of anti-Semitism are found in Christian teachings and that, despite the evolution of Christian theology, very little has been done by those in authority to radically reformulate the teachings of Christianity. In recent years, this Jewish perception has been reinforced by a rich and revealing literature, written by Christians, that corroborates and reinforces the view that Christianity has sown the seeds of anti-Semitism all the way to the Holocaust and beyond. Jews have also noted that the authors of such books and articles have remained on, or been relegated to, the periphery of their respective churches, so that their conclusions could remain unheeded by the mainstream.

However, I find it most unhelpful to engage in the all-too-common activity of Jewish accusations calculated to elicit a mixture of Christian resentment and breast-beating. The above is only intended as a reminder that the past, and the lack of change in the present, are the reasons most Jews give for avoiding Christian-Jewish dialogue. They find it undignified and futile to engage in an activity that may produce some civility, a few media opportunities and one or two symbolic acts, but that does not alter the conventional Christian image of the Church triumphant and the Synagogue blindfolded.

More significant is the fact that those Jews who engage in Jewish-Christian dialogue often harbour the same presuppositions as those who do not. Even activists in the field may suspect that Esau, now the Christian brother, is bent on biting Jacob the Jew. But they hope that with suitable tact and education they can avert that intention in favour of a real kiss. Many of those Jews who engage in dialogue – and they are a minority – do so in the quixotic hope of eliminating, or at least lessening, anti-Semitism. They believe that by making a good impression, the Jew can persuade the Christian to love him or her. The assumption here is that a Jew would never harm a Christian because “Jacob, was a mild man, who stayed in camp” (Genesis 25:27) and, therefore, presumably would not bite. Esau, by contrast, was considered the aggressive brother.

This perception has, alas, been borne out by history. During most of our common past, Christians have had access to power that they have used, and Jews have not. To this day, and despite protestations by many Christians, Jews see themselves as a hounded, persecuted minority living in a powerful and potentially dangerous Christian world. From the start, therefore, even those Jews who engage in Christian-Jewish dialogue do not see the relationship as symmetrical. But, unlike other Jews, they hope it becomes so. It takes much effort to see myself as an equal partner in dialogue and not as an advocate for a minority. I am even uncomfortable writing this, because I fear many of my fellow Jews will criticize me, not necessarily because they disagree with my observations but out of fear that, through self-exposure, I am weakening the already weak and defensive Jewish position, and that Christians may take advantage of it.

My intention is, of course, very different. I wish to contribute to a debate that might help us find the proper level and framework for purposeful and mutually satisfying co-operation. I have positive reasons that motivate my involvement in Christian-Jewish dialogue. I view such involvement as an important source for my own religious life as a Jew. To gain access to that source, I have often distanced myself from fellow Jews whose enthusiasm for Christian-Jewish dialogue is limited to a desire to show Christians that Judaism is not what is being portrayed in their hostile literature but

very similar to Christian ways.

That I am a Reform rabbi is relevant in this context. It is, of course, both historically and theologically inaccurate to accuse Reform Judaism of seeking to imitate Christianity, as many malicious Jewish opponents of Reform often do. Yet it is an inescapable fact that, because Reform in its outer manifestations is more accessible to non-Jews, some, perhaps many, Reform Jews have wanted their synagogues to create the “right” image of Judaism for their Christian neighbours. They invariably expect the rabbis to articulate and personify that image. A sign of success by which a Reform rabbi is often judged is the way in which he or she is viewed by Christian leaders.

Such inauthentic existence has its roots in anti-Semitism turned against itself and manifesting itself as Jewish self-hatred. In *Jewish Self-Hatred*, Sander L. Gilman shows how the persistence and intensity of anti-Semitism has made some Jews internalize its message and conclude that Jews are indeed what anti-Semites accuse them of being.⁴ But those same Jews had to find a way of showing the anti-Semites that they were different, and, therefore, the castigation may apply to others but not to them. Hence the disdain with which German Jews before Hitler treated recent arrivals from eastern Europe, the so-called *Ostjuden*. And, hence the original distance between the established Jews in Canada and the “greeners,” the new immigrants. That is probably also why assimilated Jews so often are more preoccupied with anti-Semitism than others. And that is why the same Jews are so keen that their Christian neighbours think well of them.

This may help explain why many of those Jews involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue are assimilated and secular. I suspect that working for Jewish-Christian co-operation is one way to believe that they can be accepted by the majority Christian culture. That there is so little theological discussion in our encounters supports the suspicion. This situation may also account for the lack of progress. How can you bring the two religions closer when representatives of one may not believe in their own?

It is not surprising, therefore, that the many excellent organizations established to promote Jewish-Christian co-operation are starved for funds and ideas. They only thrive when there is something to be indignant about, like an outburst of overt anti-Semitic activity, preferably far away. By looking at things close to home, these organizations run the risk of upsetting the various establishments acting as their titular patrons. We are, therefore, confronted with the paradox that groups ostensibly dedicated to Christian-Jewish relations rarely engage in real dialogue and often refuse to confront burning issues.

Despite David Novak’s attempt to offer a Jewish theological affirmation of the Christian-Jewish encounter, I find it difficult to be optimistic about it.⁵ Novak’s thesis is based on the common goal of redemption, despite the different tasks that Christians and Jews have been assigned in their respective covenants with God. However, if there are still exponents of Christianity who believe that the Jews delay redemption, Novak’s optimistic perspective seems as remote as all the other efforts.

Even if few theologians pay attention to it, the masses will remain unaffected. Thus Abraham Brumberg, an expert on Polish affairs, challenges the existing opportunities for high-level dialogue between Christians and Jews because the outcome in no way affects attitudes at the grassroots. He writes: “The ‘dialogue,’ then, is not designed to have much, if any, impact on most Catholic believers. It is not brought down to the level of the parish pulpit.”⁶ If even the Church in Poland – where anti-Semitism led to genocide; where it is still a force even among the so-called progressives, and that despite the fact that Poland has become virtually *judenrein*; and where the Church is extremely powerful – is not affected by dialogue, what hope is there anywhere else?

The conclusion one must come to, therefore, is that open, honest and comprehensive Christian-Jewish relations remain impossible. Judaism disappoints Christians while Christianity disappoints many Jews who hoped that the new era of religious tolerance and cooperation would bring the equality and symmetry they have dreamed of since the Enlightenment.

The pessimism among Jews is rooted in what Jews see as the Christians' failure to understand the significance of Israel for contemporary Jewish consciousness. When Cardinal Carter, the Catholic archbishop of Toronto and a genuine friend of the Jewish people, declared that, although he could grasp intellectually the Jews' attachment to Israel he could not empathize with it emotionally,⁷ the Jews who heard him were confused and disappointed. They asked: Did he really not understand, or was he merely pretending for reasons of politics and expediency? He did not know why they did not believe him. They could not understand how he failed to perceive the obvious.

Similarly, when the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Canada and the Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada issued statements critical of Israeli policies, Jews understood the pronouncements to imply that the Israelis are the sole culprits in Middle Eastern conflicts. They regarded the statements as another manifestation of Christian anti-Semitism – this time in the guise of a perceived pro-Palestinian stance. I am inclined to accept the assurances of the authors of these statements that anti-Semitism is abhorrent to them, but that they seem unable to understand the true significance of Israel for contemporary Jewish consciousness. Those who opposed dialogue feel vindicated; those who had hoped for understanding feel let down. And when they say so, they run the risk of irritating their Christian friends.

Not all Jews think this way. Marc Ellis has written suggesting that Christian-Jewish dialogue has reached an impasse for reasons akin to those I have cited. But he then states that the only way out of that impasse is to acknowledge that what the Jewish people collectively now do to Palestinians is the same as what the Church has been doing to Jews through the ages. By urging the United States to stop supporting Israel, Christians would dissolve the "ecumenical bargain" by which they are expected by Jews to embrace the State of Israel."⁸ That Ellis does not distinguish between the Jewish state and the government of that state is telling. I doubt if many Jews engaged in Christian-Jewish relations expect Christians to endorse the policies of Israel's governments, but they do expect an understanding of the significance and centrality of Jewish statehood for Judaism today. Jewish sovereignty seems to Jews the only safeguard against anti-Semitism. A failure to recognize this amounts to implied encouragement and aid to the continued persecution of Jews.

I write as someone who has often been critical of Israeli government policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians, and as an advocate of Jewish withdrawal from the "territories" as the necessary condition for the establishment of Palestinian sovereignty. I believe that Jewish settlements on the West Bank and in Gaza, whether legally justified and strategically advantageous or not, are a provocation. Yet, to see Israeli government action in the last years or decades as equivalent to the Church's action against the Jewish people over the centuries is a disturbing distortion of history. If the only way of creating a symmetry in Jewish-Christian dialogue is for Jews to pronounce themselves as culpable as the Christian Church, then the dialogue has not merely reached an impasse, but it is dead – and people like Ellis are helping bury it in the guise of wishing to revive it.

The two cardinal issues in contemporary Jewish life are the Holocaust and the State of Israel. Jews feel misunderstood by Christians on both. As a result, the more we talk, the less we say to each other; the more we insist that times have changed, the more they seem to be the same.

Yet for all my pessimism, I want to help promote Christian-Jewish co-operation. I teach a class for Christian theology students on contemporary Jewish thought. I have hosted Archbishop Desmond Tutu and would do so again, despite my disagreement with him over Israel. I am also involved in

many other projects to further Jewish-Christian understanding. If things are so bad, why are they so good? Let me attempt a personal answer.

The possibility of creating a climate of understanding between Christians and Jews through their official and authorized representatives seems remote. But the opportunities for individual Jews and Christians to be spiritually enriched by encountering each other in this open society are enormous. Official Christian-Jewish encounters yield few results, but Christian-Jewish dialogue works between individuals. While Churches will continue to make statements about Israel that Jews will see as hostile, individual Christians exist who not only understand the significance of statehood for Judaism, but can share the pains and ambiguities that contemporary political realities have imposed on Jews. Cardinal Carter, a prince of the Church, may not understand the significance of Israel for Jews, but Walter Brueggemann, a Bible scholar and Christian theologian, does.⁹ Similarly, some Christians can rise above the theological presuppositions that Jews should forgive the Nazis, without compromising their own Christian commitment. The same people can also see the damage caused by an unbalanced statement on Israel, an unguarded comment on the Holocaust or an unwarranted threat against those who object to tourism to Oberammergau, where the intensely anti-Jewish passion play has been performed.

There are Jews who engage in Jewish-Christian dialogue, not because they naively believe they will cure anti-Semitism, but because it deepens their own religious commitment, not in a vain attempt to make a good impression, but out of an earnest resolve to affirm other believers. They do not pretend to have reached complete agreement, but they sense that they walk in the same direction and need each other's support.

Christian-Jewish encounters will not rewrite history, compensate for past sins or blur theological differences. Dialogue seems to work, however, when one believer reveals herself or himself to another believer and thus validates the conviction that there are other paths to God.

Religious encounters with Christians have a similar effect on me as the encounter with Eugene Rosenstock had on the young Franz Rosenzweig in 1913.¹⁰ Rosenzweig was so impressed by Rosenstock's Christian convictions that he went back to study his own tradition and, as a result, came to formulate Judaism in a new key. I do not aspire to the insights of a genius, but I do aspire to the commitment and enthusiasm of a Jew who has found his Jewish path with the help of many, some of whom are committed Christians.

It is Rosenzweig's contemporary and collaborator, Martin Buber, who through his philosophy of dialogue has enabled me to understand how such help works. As Buber might have put it: As Jews we may be neurotic and prejudiced; as Christians you may be burdened by a history, a hierarchy and a theology; but what happens between us can be real, manifest as the work of the *Shechina*, 'the presence of God' by whatever name we may wish to call it. My involvement in Jewish-Christian co-operation has helped shape my own conviction that, as much as we may need institutions, and as much as I am part of several of them, the spirit of God is most discernible in individuals, no matter what institutions or religious traditions they belong to. Since these individuals are invariably in a minority, they need each other for comfort and strength. Marilyn Ferguson calls such people conspirators, men and women who recognize the advent of a new paradigm and are prepared to advance its course ahead of others, although the majority continues to defend the old. Christian-Jewish dialogue is most effective when it becomes a forum for such conspirators, not to take cover in the face of a common enemy, but to blaze a trail in search of a common destiny.

Some people justify Christian-Jewish dialogue by suggesting that the time has come for Jews and Christians to stop arguing with each other because contemporary history demands that they join to fight their ever-more potent enemy, secularism. It is doubtful whether such a cynical call for an uneasy alliance is possible or helpful. It may not be possible, because it ignores the fact that one

difference between Judaism and Christianity is their respective attitudes to secularism. And that one thing we can learn from each other is how to accommodate ourselves to the secular civil religion of our time. The call to fight the alleged enemy may not be helpful, because it suggests that only foes can forge friendship between us. The call to arms against a common enemy can be a reflection of spiritual bankruptcy. The call to fight secularism through Christian-Jewish dialogue seems a way of transposing the earlier call to fight anti-Semitism through Christian-Jewish encounters. Since secularism is not going to be defeated in this way, just as Christian-Jewish relations have not defeated anti-Semitism, the enterprise seems doomed to failure.

If the biblical Jacob is identified with the Jewish people and his brother Esau with gentiles, the possibility of a genuine embrace must be questioned. But if Jacob and Esau are seen in the way the Bible describes them, as two individuals with a common ancestry but a different history, an embrace becomes possible each time individuals meet. The conflict posed at the beginning of this article can be resolved in typical rabbinic fashion. Those who say Esau bit Jacob, have an abstract collective in mind. Those who testify to a genuine embrace and a genuine kiss, have individuals in mind.

I began by suggesting that nothing has changed since the time of the rabbinic exegesis. Let me modify that and say that the only prospect for change is greater emphasis on individual encounters and an ever-widening circle of “conspirators,” caused by the open society in which we live, and the liberal ambiance in which we work. Eventually, this stance may become the norm rather than the exception.

Most of the traditional and statutory organizations and committees set up to bring the Jewish people and the Christian church closer together are languishing. Individual efforts, however, continue to flourish. I never cease to be enriched by frequent contacts with fellow-“conspirators” who do not seek to deny history or rewrite theology, but who try to learn from one another and, through creative synthesis, deepen their own religious commitment with the help of the insights and the experiences of the other.

Only when we have realized the futility of adjusting theology for the sake of making a good impression, and only when we have accepted that the past cannot be altered, does real Christian-Jewish dialogue become possible. Only when Jacob remains Jacob with all his foibles and feelings, and Esau is Esau without denying his stance, can they embrace as brothers. When they attempt more, Esau’s kiss turns into a bite and Jacob’s neck turns to marble so that Esau breaks his teeth.¹¹ Let our dialogue always leave us with open arms and unbroken teeth.

Notes

1. The Masoretic text is the vocalized text of the Hebrew Bible used in all standard editions.
2. Rashi on Genesis 33:4.
3. R. Yannai in Genesis Rabba 78:12.
4. Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986).
5. David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1989).
6. Abraham Brumberg, “The Problem That Won’t Go Away: Anti-Semitism in Poland (Again),” *Tikkun* (January/February, 1990): 33.
7. In a lecture at Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto, on November 27, 1989.
8. Marc Ellis, “Jewish-Christian Impasse,” *The Tablet* (January 20, 1990): 71ff.
9. See Brueggemann’s *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
10. See, for example, Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 23ff.

11. Genesis Rabba 78:12.

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