We Must Learn to Hear What the Other is Really Saying

09.06.2026 | Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein

A response to Prof. Sergio Della Pergola. Concerning Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa's Recent Pastoral Letter.

Introduction

The recent Pastoral Letter of Jerusalem's Cardinal, Pierbattista Pizzaballa (https://lpj.org/en/news/letter-to-the-diocese; in multiple languages) has been received with mixed, if not negative, feelings within Italian Jewry. This is largely due to a critical reception by the eminent demographer Prof. Sergio Della Pergola (henceforth: DLP), an Israeli academic of Italian origin, whose voice is heard in the Italian Jewish community. Reading the Cardinal's letter, and then DLP's response, I am reminded of a similar situation that I addressed over fifteen years ago (https://elijah-interfaith.org/addressing-the-world/newsletter-archive/special-april-2010-edition). Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, during a Good Friday sermon delivered before Pope Benedict, attempted to make a statement that was appreciative of Judaism. Due to a certain juxtaposition of elements, it was misconstrued and caused a small stir in Jewish-Christian circles. In an essay titled "We are Bad Listeners" I sought to present Cantalamessa's message in context and to show that it means just the reverse of what was attributed to it.

I find myself in a similar situation again. Then, I wrote of a Cardinal I did not know personally and who has since become a friend. Here I write about a friend of many years, who is also a partner in my interfaith work, and whose message I feel needs to be seen in its proper light. As a variation on the theme of "bad listeners," the title of the present piece refers to the obligation to truly hear what the other is saying and not to project upon him our own interests and worldviews. This hermeneutical approach, which would seem basic to any reading of a text belonging to another religious tradition, is seriously lacking in the response issued by Prof. DLP. It is, in part, a matter of academic discipline. DLP is a demographer and statistician; he sees the world through the lens of communities, numbers, and political and social institutions. But as I will show, his response never engages the theological heart of the Cardinal's letter at all, and a reader who cannot hear that register — or will not — is not equipped to judge the document he claims to assess. What is required is the capacity to read a religious text on its own terms, especially the religious text of another faith. As it turns out, and as I will suggest, the otherness is really native to Jewish tradition, that in fact has viewed reality for millennia through a perspective that has much in common with that offered by the Cardinal.

I present my response to Della Pergola in three parts. First, a brief description of the letter in and of itself. Second, an analysis of, and response to, DLP's response. Third, reflections on where to go from here.

Pizzaballa's Pastoral Letter

The pastoral letter is titled *"They returned to Jerusalem with great joy": A proposal for living the vocation of the Church in the Holy Land*. It states clearly who the intended audience is — the diocese. Its bishop seeks to offer it guidance and vision in troubled times. It is, first and foremost,

an internal pedagogic and spiritual document. The purpose of the document is introduced right at the beginning: “This Letter is not intended for a quick or partial reading, nor is it to be used as a text of political analysis. It is offered as one to be read slowly, as a tool for discernment and the promotion of conversation and reflection within our ecclesial contexts, our communities, monasteries, and families.” The Cardinal reiterates later: “this *Letter* is primarily pastoral in nature: it does not contain purely political considerations and analyses.”

All these elements — the intended audience, the envisioned context, and the exclusion of politics from the letter — are essential to a correct reading of the document and its purpose. Ignore these remarks and the letter’s orientation, and the document will surely be misunderstood. This, indeed, is what has happened in DLP’s response. A quick, partial, and political reading was applied, one that totally distorts the message of the letter.

The letter is structured in three parts. The first describes the present-day reality of the Church. It covers a multitude of issues — to my mind too many — ranging from the state of international institutions, media, AI, the effects of war, demography, and more. The point in covering so many areas is not to be comprehensive or to offer an analysis of one particular domain. It is to describe the multiple factors and challenges that contribute to the present sense of crisis across all parts of the diocese. These provide the background for a spiritual message Pizzaballa seeks to offer his community.

The second part of the letter is its core and its justification. Based on a reading of the book of Revelation, the final book in the Christian canon, the Cardinal seeks a way of relating the heavenly and earthly Jerusalem. This is a tension and a struggle within the Church of two millennia’ standing. Every church that is consecrated appeals to the heavenly Jerusalem (not to Rome) and seeks to incarnate it. The vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem is essential to a Christian orientation in time, space, and history. What is new in this document is that this reflection is now taking place from within Jerusalem, by the local Catholic leader, in relation to this very tension between earthly and heavenly Jerusalem. In other words, it is a theological-pastoral reflection that goes to the heart of the Christian vision and seeks to realize it within the living Christian community. Note: not within the context of the political realities of the Christian community but within the lived *social and spiritual reality* of the community.

Pizzaballa’s vision is highly rarified. I ask myself how many within the community, even within its leadership, are capable of following so nuanced and refined a spiritual view. Prof. DLP may be excused for not grasping what the Cardinal is saying; it may be over his head, in the same way that it is above the head of many priests and faithful of the diocese. But this does not detract from the power of the vision itself. It only means that the work of translating and implementing the vision must be undertaken. I personally find the vision inspiring and important, in and of itself and as a contribution to contemporary theological thinking.

The third part of the letter seeks to translate the message of the second section into practical guidelines for how the Christian community should live as a minority in this land. Because it is not a political document, there is nothing in it of a political nature. The message is one of prayer, purification of memory, and striving to bring a truly spiritual perspective to contemporary reality. Within this contemporary reality dialogue has a major role to play, and one of the issues the letter struggles with is the challenge of upholding and practicing dialogue under present circumstances.

The letter is long — nearly 18,000 words, to my mind longer than it needs to be. Its core is the second section; the first offers context that could have been provided in other, more compact ways. The important point, however, is that this is an internal document with a clear spiritual vision, intended to give hope and meaning to the local Christian community.

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Della Pergola's Response

Let me now turn to DLP's response (read in translation, and quoted here in translation). Prof. DLP makes almost every possible mistake in the book in approaching this document, and it is no surprise that his conclusion is totally distorted. By way of introduction to this section: we Jews have suffered from thousands of years of partial, distorting readings of our texts, fanning the fires of hatred and antisemitism. One of the lessons of the present era, in which new relations have opened up between Christians and Jews — as alluded to in the final reference of DLP's piece — is that we must read texts for what they are, not impose our own views on them, in order to avoid distortion. The other must be presented for what the other says and seeks to be, not only in line with our own particular concerns and expectations. Perhaps these lessons in the history of reading other religious traditions are not so relevant to the work of a contemporary demographer. But they are highly relevant to the reading of a theological text, and here DLP fails miserably.

Before turning to the particulars, one fact governs everything that follows. DLP's response engages only the first part of the letter — the survey of present-day reality — and even there fastens on a mere handful of sentences. Of the second part, the theological heart of the document, the sustained meditation on the heavenly and earthly Jerusalem that is the letter's core and its very reason for being, he says nothing. Not a sentence. He has not so much read the letter as read around it, responding to its framing while leaving its argument wholly untouched. Whether he could not hear that register or chose not to engage it makes little difference; the two are one and the same. A response to a theological document that never reaches its theology has disqualified itself as a reading of that document. And there is a particular irony in a Jewish reader's deafness here, to which I will return.

Here is a numbered list of flaws in Della Pergola's presentation. I first cite DLP and introduce my response with my own initials.

> 1. DLP begins with his own appreciation for the Cardinal, whom he knows personally. In the past he visited him to clarify certain issues (https://moked.it/international/jerusalem-della-pergola-recounts-his-meeting-with-possible-future-pope-cardinal-pizzaballa/). I wish he had visited him to discuss his reservations before publishing this piece. DLP writes: No one better understands and is able to analyze the complexities of the political system of the State of Israel, as well as the Jewish diaspora which — willingly or not — is inextricably involved in the state's choices and dilemmas. From these premises, the reader's expectations begin. A highly detailed, refined, and analytical document like the pastoral letter of the Patriarch of the Holy Land does not seem like a simple diocesan document to be distributed to a few thousand faithful, because this is the size of the Catholic population of the 15 million total inhabitants in the territory of Israel and Palestine (in addition to the 11.5 million in Jordan and 1.5 million in Cyprus) where Pizzaballa's diocesan work takes place. It seems more plausible to think, rather, that it is a summary of the impressions and reflections developed over 35 years of pastoral activity, almost as if it were a legacy, a program, to be handed down to everyone.

AGG: Here is what DLP is really saying. As a demographer, I don't believe you. Looking at the numbers, it doesn't make sense to me that you are doing what you claim to be doing; after all, you don't have enough believers to justify your intellectual or spiritual efforts. I, however, have my own expectations. Hence, I approach the letter from the context of my expectations, knowing who you are. Reading in light of my expectations, and contrary to your own stated purposes, I find your document flawed. There is no need to argue with DLP here. It is sufficient to demonstrate how jaundiced and inappropriate his starting point is.

> 2. DLP: The document is explicitly a spiritual guide and not a geopolitical analysis. One might wonder, however, to what extent the two sides can remain disconnected and how much we can ignore the concrete reality for the document to retain its relevance.

AGG: DLP takes note of the document's stated intention, then sets it aside, asking how far the spiritual and the political can really be held apart. The question would carry more weight were the answer not to lie within his own tradition. For two thousand years the Jewish people held, transmitted, and lived an intense spiritual vision of Jerusalem with no political power over it whatsoever. The decoupling of a spiritual Jerusalem from a sovereign one is no naïve abstraction; it is the lived condition of rabbinic Judaism, which gave the very tension its own name — the Jerusalem above and the Jerusalem below. That a Jewish reader should find a spiritual vision untethered from political reality implausible is itself the most striking thing about his response. Perhaps it is because he reads from within the framework of the modern State of Israel, with sovereignty restored. This context could lead to the loss of important parts of the Jewish tradition, cultivated in exile, when Jerusalem was held in the heart rather than in the hand.

> 3. DLP: Reading the document, one might get the impression that Jerusalem is the most important place in the world for the Catholic faith, and one might therefore ask what role Rome plays in this regard. Why isn't Jerusalem the central seat of Catholicism, with the papacy and the Curia?

AGG: Again, the Professor is unable to distinguish between a spiritual and a political message. The inability is thus deeper than just the present-day political reality in the Holy Land: he cannot conceive of a spiritual message that is independent of political power. The point is curious, given that two thousand years of Jewish exile taught us Jews precisely how to live in such a split reality.

> 4. DLP: there is no trace of the State of Israel, and the Palestinian Authority does not exist. The document completely ignores these entities without even justifying the omission.

AGG: Really? DLP himself quoted the justification. He may disagree, or think the split between political and spiritual is not viable. But why distort the Cardinal's message?

> 5. DLP: In the opening of the first part of the letter, Pizzaballa states that "October 7, 2023, and the war in Gaza have meant something different and disruptive for each of the two peoples of this land." In the following order: "For the Palestinians, it represents the last dramatic phase in a long history of humiliation and exodus. For the Israelis, however, it represents something unprecedented: violence that has brought to life the horrors that occurred in Europe eighty years ago." Here, Pizzaballa loses me, the reader, when he thus describes events that unfolded in a dramatically reversed order, and with different actors. October 7 is, yes, a historic "watershed," but be careful, in a completely different way than the cardinal describes it. For the Jews, October 7 represents a brief replay of the Holocaust, eighty years after the true and unique Holocaust: a barbaric and monstrous massacre of civilians in their homes. But for Muslims, it represents the choice of unprecedented violence to assert their absolute and exclusive ownership of the territory, to erase Israel and erect an Islamic Caliphate in its place.

AGG: This is the key paragraph in DLP's objections, and its claim is that Pizzaballa is somehow taking sides, preferring one narrative over the other. This is a highly tendentious, and misleading, reading. I cannot think of a more neutral way to present both perspectives. One of the main issues that Jews have had since October 7th is the sense that the world does not recognize the depth of

our trauma on that day. The Cardinal does. He is explicit about it later on: “Israeli society has been traumatized since October 7, 2023.” I cannot find a meaningful difference between what the Cardinal stated and what DLP would have liked him to have stated. That a larger political vision lay behind the Hamas attack belongs to a different order of analysis than the one the letter is conducting; its absence from a pastoral text is no distortion. Pizzaballa states that this is a watershed moment for both communities, each for its own reason, offering the deepest and most sympathetic appreciation for the Jewish side. So is the problem that he did not express himself in the specific political context DLP would have liked? That is DLP’s problem, not the Patriarch’s. If anything, an unbiased reading of the letter reveals just the opposite. DLP makes much of whose side is told first, as though that revealed Pizzaballa’s sympathies. The truth seems to be the reverse. The rhetoric presenting the Israeli side is far more powerful and more evocative; it comes second because of the rhetorical effect of “upping the ante” — leaving the more powerful element to the end. Whereas for the Palestinians it is part of an *ongoing* issue, for the Jews it is *unique and unprecedented*. This reads far more plausibly as an expression of deep understanding and empathy than as the taking of sides. DLP has seized on a single rhetorical strategy — one line within an 18,000-word document, which evidently missed its mark where he is concerned — and let it define the entire document for him. Or, as he puts it, he lost the Cardinal then and there, and there was therefore nothing further to read or think about. Intellectually, this is poor and dishonest. In terms of Jewish-Christian relations, it is destructive.

> 6. Finally, DLP fine-tunes his hearing mechanism to hear only criticism of Israeli authority and not of Muslim governments. My hearing is apparently not so finely tuned — nor is this what the document is about.

Where Do We Go From Here

Regrettably, Della Pergola’s response seems to have been damaging to Jewish-Christian relations in Italy (so I am told), not to mention the sense of personal hurt to the author of the letter. This is a very difficult time for Jews worldwide. Italy has seen an unprecedented wave of antisemitism and hatred rise since October 7th. We need friends. We do not need to turn friends into enemies. This is true of the Cardinal, but even more so of the Catholic Church, parts of which are slowly turning against us. How we listen and how we respond are therefore vital factors in determining not only Jewish-Christian relations but the quality of Jewish existence in various parts of the world. It is imperative that the wrong impression generated by DLP’s one-sided comments be set straight. I believe the Cardinal is owed an apology by the Professor. If the Professor is unable to offer it, perhaps they should meet again for the purpose of understanding each other. Surely the fact that the Palestinian perspective was reported before the Jewish one should not close forever the doors of dialogue, especially among friends of old.

But beyond correcting the harm caused by DLP’s quick and partial response, a larger question emerges from the Patriarch’s document: what is the spiritual vision that each of the communities holds for Jerusalem, and what room does the other faith have within it? DLP seems to allude to this at the end of his piece when he writes: “The possibility of someone else who can cultivate ideals of spiritual heritage concerning the same land — and how to make these competing ideals compatible — is not considered.” It is not considered because it is not the purpose of the letter. But it is certainly its implied invitation. The Patriarch has put forth a *spiritual* vision for Jerusalem. Can we Jews — and eventually Muslims — articulate our own vision for a spiritual Jerusalem that makes room for the other? Present-day reality in Jerusalem seems to suggest the Cardinal is light years ahead of Jewish religious leadership in this respect. But must it be so? Della Pergola seems to suggest that there is a Jewish *spiritual* alternative that he does not articulate — nor is it for him to articulate.

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The great invitation of this document, and of this debate, is for leaders, visionaries, and theologians of the different religions to come together and reflect on the spiritual vision offered by the Patriarch, and on what alternative, parallel, or identical visions they might offer in return. This would elevate the conversation from bickering over the impact of rhetorical strategies to the kind of meaningful interreligious exchange this letter calls for. If DLP's voice was heard within Jewish-Italian circles, I would hope my own voice also gets a hearing, and that an invitation will be issued — by the appropriate representative body or synagogue — to hold such a conversation. This is how friendships are made and reinforced. This is also how to live a piece of the Heavenly Jerusalem down on earth, wherever it may be.

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