

Between Jerusalem and Rome

Reflections on 50 Years of *Nostra Aetate*

Preamble

In the biblical account of creation, God fashions a single human being as the progenitor of all humanity. Thus, the Bible's unmistakable message is that all human beings are members of a single family. And after the deluge of Noah, this message is reinforced when the new phase of history is once again inaugurated by a single family. In the beginning, God's providence is exercised over a universal, undifferentiated humanity.

As God chose Avraham, and subsequently Yitzchak and Yaakov, He entrusted them with a dual mission: to found the nation of Israel that would inherit, settle and establish a model society in the holy, promised land of Israel, all while serving as a source of light for all mankind.

Ever since, particularly in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. by the Romans, we Jews encountered persecution after exile after persecution. And yet, *the Eternal One of Israel does not lie*, and His eternal covenant with the nation of Israel manifested itself time and again: despite the greatest adversities, our nation has endured. After the darkest hour since the destruction of our holy Temple in Jerusalem, when six million of our brethren were viciously murdered and the embers of their bones were smoldering in the shadows of the Nazi crematoria, God's eternal covenant was once again manifest, as the remnants of Israel gathered their strength and enacted a miraculous reawakening of Jewish consciousness. Communities were reestablished throughout the Diaspora, and many Jews responded to the clarion call to return to Eretz Yisrael, where a sovereign Jewish state arose.

The Jewish people's dual obligations – to be *a light unto the nations* and to secure its own future despite the world's hatred and violence – have been overwhelmingly difficult to fulfill. Despite innumerable obstacles, the Jewish nation has bequeathed many blessings upon mankind, both in the realms of the sciences, culture, philosophy, literature, technology and commerce, and in the realms of faith, spirituality, ethics and morality. These, too, are a manifestation of God's eternal covenant with the Jewish people.

Undoubtedly, the Shoah constitutes the historical nadir of the relations between Jews and our non-Jewish neighbors in Europe. Out of the continent nurtured by Christianity for over a millennium, a bitter and evil shoot sprouted forth, murdering six million of our brethren with industrial precision, including one and a half million children. Many of those who participated in this most heinous crime, exterminating entire families and communities, had been nurtured in Christian families and communities.

At the same time, throughout that millennium, even in very dark times, heroic individuals arose – sons and daughters of the Catholic Church, both laymen and leaders – who fought against the persecution of Jews, helping them in the darkest of times.

With the close of World War II, a new era of peaceful coexistence and acceptance began to emerge in Western European countries, and an era of bridge-building and tolerance took hold in many Christian denominations. Faith communities reevaluated their historical rejections of others, and decades of fruitful interaction and cooperation began. Moreover, though we Jews had achieved political emancipation a century or two before, we were not yet truly accepted as equal, full-fledged members of the nations in which we lived. Following the Shoah, Jewish emancipation in the Diaspora, as well as the right of the Jewish people to live as a sovereign nation in our own land, finally became obvious and natural.

During the ensuing seven decades, Jewish communities and spiritual leaders gradually reassessed Judaism's relationship with the members and leaders of other faith communities.

Turnaround – *Nostra Aetate*

Fifty years ago, twenty years after the Shoah, with its declaration *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4), the Catholic Church began a process of introspection that increasingly expurgated from Church doctrine any hostility toward Jews, enabling trust and confidence to grow between our respective faith communities.

In this regard, Pope John XXIII was a transformative figure in Jewish-Catholic relations no less than in the history of the Church itself. He played a courageous role in rescuing Jews during the Holocaust, and it was his recognition of the need to revise “the teaching of contempt” that helped overcome resistance to change and ultimately facilitated the adoption of *Nostra Aetate* (no. 4).

It is our understanding that in its most focused, concrete, and, for the Church, most dramatic assertion, *Nostra Aetate* recognized that any Jew who was not directly and personally involved in the Crucifixion did not bear any responsibility for it. Pope Benedict XVI's elaborations and explications of this theme are particularly noteworthy.

In addition, we understand that basing itself on Christian Scriptures, *Nostra Aetate* asserted that the Divine election of Israel, which it calls “the gift of God,” will not be revoked, stating, “God ... does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues.” It issued the injunction that “the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God.” Later, in 2013, Pope Francis elaborated upon this theme in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: “God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant and to bring forth treasures of wisdom which flow from their encounter with His word.”

As we see it, *Nostra Aetate* also paved the way for the Vatican's 1993 establishment of full diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. Through the establishment of this relationship, the Catholic Church showed how it had truly repudiated its portrayal of the Jewish people as a nation condemned to wander until the final advent. This historic moment facilitated Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage to Israel in 2000, which served as another powerful demonstration of a new era in Catholic-Jewish relations. Since then, the last two popes have also made similar state visits.

Nostra Aetate strongly “decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone” as a matter of religious duty. Accordingly, Pope John Paul II repeatedly affirmed that anti-Semitism is “a sin against God and humanity.” At the Western Wall in Jerusalem, he recited the following prayer: “God of our fathers, You chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.”

Pope Francis recently recognized a new, pervasive and even fashionable form of anti-Semitism, when he told a World Jewish Congress delegation: “To attack Jews is anti-Semitism, but an outright attack on the State of Israel is also anti-Semitism. There may be political disagreements between governments and on political issues, but the State of Israel has every right to exist in safety and prosperity.”

Finally, *Nostra Aetate* called for fostering “mutual understanding and respect,” and for conducting “fraternal dialogues.” In 1974, Pope Paul VI heeded this call by creating the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews; the Jewish community, in response to this call, has met regularly with Church representatives.

We applaud the work of popes, church leaders, and scholars who passionately contributed to these developments, including the strong-willed proponents of Catholic-Jewish dialogue at the end of World War II, whose collective work was a leading impetus for *Nostra Aetate*. The most important milestones were the Second Vatican Council, the establishment of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, the recognition of Judaism as a living religion with an eternal covenant, the appreciation of the significance of the Shoah and its antecedents, and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. The theological writings of the heads of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews have contributed much to the Church documents which followed *Nostra Aetate*, as have the writings of numerous other theologians.

In its recent reflections on *Nostra Aetate*, “The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable,” the Pontifical Commission unambiguously endorsed the notion that Jews are participants in God's

salvation, calling this idea “an unfathomable divine mystery.” It further proclaimed that “the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews.” Though the Catholic Church has not disavowed witnessing to Jews, we understand that it has nonetheless shown understanding and sensitivity towards deeply held Jewish sensibilities, and distanced itself from active mission to Jews.

The evident transformation of the attitude of the Church toward the Jewish community is strikingly exemplified by the recent visit of Pope Francis to a synagogue, which renders him the third Pope to make this highly significant gesture. We echo his comment, “From enemies and strangers we have become friends and brothers. It is my hope that closeness, mutual understanding and respect between our two communities continue to grow.”

These welcoming attitudes and actions stand in stark contrast with centuries of teachings of contempt and of pervasive hostility, and herald a most encouraging chapter in an epic process of societal transformation.

Evaluation and Reevaluation

Initially, many Jewish leaders were skeptical of the sincerity of the Church’s overtures to the Jewish community, due to the long history of Christian anti-Judaism. Over time, it has become clear that the transformations in the Church’s attitudes and teachings are not only sincere but also increasingly profound, and that we are entering an era of growing tolerance, mutual respect, and solidarity between members of our respective faiths.

Orthodox Judaism – through the American Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America – had already been a part of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) set up in the late sixties, as the official Jewish representative for relations with the Vatican. A new page in the relations of Orthodox Judaism with the Catholic Church was turned with the establishment of the bilateral committee of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel with the Vatican, commencing in 2002 under the chairmanship of the chief rabbi of Haifa Rabbi She’ar Yashuv Cohen. The published declarations from the thirteen meetings of this bilateral commission (alternating annually between Rome and Jerusalem) carefully avoid matters pertaining to fundamentals of faith, but rather address a broad spectrum of contemporary social and scientific challenges, highlighting shared values while respecting the differences between the two faith traditions.

We acknowledge that this fraternity cannot sweep away our doctrinal differences; it does, rather, reinforce genuine mutual positive dispositions towards fundamental values that we share, including but not limited to reverence for the Hebrew Bible.

The theological differences between Judaism and Christianity are profound. The core beliefs of Christianity that center on the person of “Jesus as the Messiah“ and the embodiment of the “second person of a triune God” create an irreconcilable separation from Judaism. The history of Jewish martyrdom in Christian Europe serves as tragic testimony to the devotion and tenacity with which Jews resisted beliefs incompatible with their ancient and eternal faith, which requires absolute fidelity to both the Written and Oral Torah. Despite those profound differences, some of Judaism’s highest authorities have asserted that Christians maintain a special status because they worship the Creator of Heaven and Earth Who liberated the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage and Who exercises providence over all creation.

The doctrinal differences are essential and cannot be debated or negotiated; their meaning and importance belong to the internal deliberations of the respective faith communities. Judaism, drawing its particularity from its received Tradition, going back to the days of its glorious prophets and particularly to the Revelation at Sinai, will forever remain loyal to its principles, laws and eternal teachings. Furthermore, our interfaith discussions are informed by the profound insights of such great Jewish thinkers as Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, Rabbi Lord Immanuel Jakobovits, and many others, who eloquently argued that the religious experience is a private one which can often only be truly understood within the framework of its own faith community.

However, doctrinal differences do not and may not stand in the way of our peaceful collaboration for the betterment of our shared world and the lives of the children of Noah. To further this end, it is crucial that our faith communities continue to encounter and grow acquainted with one another, and earn each other's trust.

The Road Forward

Despite the irreconcilable theological differences, we Jews view Catholics as our partners, close allies, friends and brothers in our mutual quest for a better world blessed with peace, social justice and security.

We understand our mission to be *a light unto the nations*, which obliges us to contribute to humanity's appreciation for holiness, morality and piety. As the Western world grows more and more secular, it abandons many of the moral values shared by Jews and Christians. Religious freedom is thus increasingly threatened by the forces of both secularism and religious extremism. We therefore seek the partnership of the Catholic community in particular, and other faith communities in general, to assure the future of religious freedom, to foster the moral principles of our faiths, particularly the sanctity of life and the significance of the traditional family, and “to cultivate the moral and religious conscience of society.” One of the lessons of the Shoah is the obligations, for Jews as well as gentiles, to combat antisemitism in particular, especially in light of once again growing antisemitism. These lessons have to be expressed both in the educational and in the legal spheres of all nations, without compromise.

Furthermore, as a people who suffered from persecution and genocide throughout our history, we are all too aware of the very real danger facing many Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere; as they are persecuted and menaced by violence and death at the hands of those who invoke God's Name in vain through violence and terror.

We condemn hereby any and all violence against any person on account of his beliefs or his religion. We similarly condemn all acts of vandalism, wanton destruction and / or desecration of the hallowed places of all religions.

We call upon the Church to join us in deepening our combat against our generation's new barbarism, namely the radical offshoots of Islam, which endanger our global society and does not spare the very numerous moderate Muslims. It threatens world peace in general and the Christian and Jewish communities in particular. We call on all people of good will to join forces to fight this evil.

Despite profound theological differences, Catholics and Jews share common beliefs in the Divine origin of the Torah and in the idea of an ultimate redemption, and now, also, in the affirmation that religions must use moral behavior and religious education — not war, coercion, or social pressure — to influence and inspire.

We ordinarily refrain from expressing expectations regarding other faith communities' doctrines. However, certain kinds of doctrines cause real suffering; those Christian doctrines, rituals and teachings that express negative attitudes toward Jews and Judaism do inspire and nurture anti-Semitism. Therefore, to extend the amicable relations and common causes cultivated between Catholics and Jews as a result of *Nostra Aetate*, we call upon all Christian denominations that have not yet done so to follow the example of the Catholic Church and excise anti-Semitism from their liturgy and doctrines, to end the active mission to Jews, and to work towards a better world hand-in-hand with us, the Jewish people.

We seek to deepen our dialogue and partnership with the Church in order to foster our mutual understanding and to advance the goals outlined above. We seek to find additional ways that will enable us, together, to improve the world: to go in God's ways, feed the hungry and dress the naked, give joy to widows and orphans, provide refuge to the persecuted and the oppressed, and thus merit His blessings.

The 13th of Iyar, 5777 (May 9th 2017)

For the CER:

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, CER President	Rabbi Dr. Riccardo Di Segni, CER Vice President	Rabbi Arie Folger, Chairman of the Nostra Aetate Response Committee
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For the Chief Rabbinate of Israel:

Rabbi Dr. Ratzon Arusi, Chairman of the Commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel for Interreligious Affairs

For the RCA:

Rabbi Elazar Muskin, Rabbi Mark Dratch, Rabbi Dr. David Berger
RCA President RCA Executive Vice President Senior Advisor on Interfaith Affairs

About the Signatory Organizations

<u>CER</u>	<u>Chief Rabbinate of Israel</u>	<u>RCA</u>
The Conference of European Rabbis (CER) is the primary rabbinical alliance in Europe. It unites more than 700 religious leaders of the mainstream synagogue communities in Europe. The conference is designed to maintain and defend the religious rights of Jews in Europe and has become the voice of Judaism for the European continent.	The Chief Rabbinate of Israel is recognized by Israeli law as the head of religious law and spiritual authority for the Jewish people in Israel. A Chief Rabbinate Council assists the two chief rabbis, who alternate in its presidency. It has legal and administrative authority to organize religious arrangements for Israel's Jews. It also responds to halakhic questions submitted by Jewish public bodies in the Diaspora. By law, the chief rabbinate has jurisdiction over marriage and divorce, burials of Jews, conversion to Judaism, establishing Jewish identity, supervision of the rabbinical courts system, kosher certification and supervision of holy sites.	The Rabbinical Council of America, with national headquarters in New York City, is a professional organization serving more than 1000 Orthodox Rabbis in the United States of America, Canada, Israel, and around the world. Membership is comprised of duly ordained Orthodox Rabbis who serve in positions of the congregational rabbinate, Jewish education, chaplaincies, and other allied fields of Jewish communal work.