

## Has there been a Jewish response to *Nostra Aetate*?

The publication of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 was a watershed event in the history of Catholic-Jewish relations in particular and Christian-Jewish relations in general. A leading American rabbi involved in inter-religious dialogue has called it “a Copernican revolution;”<sup>1</sup> another rabbi, in Israel, “a sea change.”

<sup>2</sup> A Catholic has written that “... the renewal catalyzed by *Nostra Aetate* can properly be described by the Greek word *metanoia* (Hebrew *teshuvah*), meaning a complete “turning,” a total reorientation of attitude or action.”<sup>3</sup>

But it had very little impact in Israel and even in the Diaspora, its influence in Jewish circles has been somewhat limited. In this paper, I will briefly consider some of the reasons for that. I do, believe, however, that there has been an impressive Jewish response that has perhaps gone unnoticed or, at least, under noticed.

### In Israel

During the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), most Israelis were pre-occupied with other issues.<sup>4</sup> The State of Israel itself was still very young (in 1962, it was only 15 years old!) The key challenges were, as always, defense-related, but also nation-building through absorption of mass immigration. Just prior to the Second Vatican Council was the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann, a source of fascination for the Israeli public, which served to re-enforce the feelings of isolation of the Jewish people from the rest of the world and its heritage of persecution at the hands of people self-identified as Christians.

The only major Israeli official to be deeply concerned with the Council and with the work that later emerged as *Nostra Aetate*, was Morris Fisher, the fledgling state’s Ambassador to Italy.<sup>5</sup> Few of his colleagues in the Israeli Foreign Ministry even knew or cared much about Christianity. Fisher was

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005, upon the fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal, executive director of the National Council of Synagogues, as quoted in Gary Spruch, *Wide Horizons: Abraham Joshua Heschel, AJC, and the Spirit of Nostra Aetate*, publ. by the AJC, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi David Rosen, conference of the Holy See Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry, Oct. 27, 2005, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_council](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_council)

<sup>3</sup> Philip A. Cunningham, “Jewish-Catholic Relationship Transformed,” [http://archive.adl.org/main\\_interfaith/nostra\\_aetate](http://archive.adl.org/main_interfaith/nostra_aetate), 2005

<sup>4</sup> I have a forthcoming article entitled “Reflections on the impact of *Nostra Aetate* on Israeli Life.”

<sup>5</sup> For this, and other insights, see: Uri Bialer, *Cross on the Star of David: The Christian World in Israel’s Foreign Policy 1948-1967*, (in Hebrew), Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2006, esp. pp. 69-119.

involved with the work of the Council, but died in 1965, several months before “the Jewish document” finally came out.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, in the Arab world, there was general uneasiness about the projected document. Arab Christians felt threatened, fearing that more openness on the part of the Church vis-a-vis the Jewish people would have negative political ramifications for them in their home countries. Not having directly lived through the Holocaust, they saw Jews not as victims, but as representatives of an enemy state.

The embrace of NA<sup>7</sup> by the official bodies of the American Jewish community served to further distance the Israeli establishment from the document. It was perceived as a subject for Diaspora Jews. American Jews were perceived by the Israelis as “*shtadlanim*,”<sup>8</sup> going out of their way to celebrate a “victory,” which, to the Israelis, was really just a very partial improvement, reminding some Israelis of the fawning attitudes that allegedly had characterized, in history, the relations between Jews in the Diaspora and some of their non-Jewish rulers.

Meaningful dialogue between Christians and Jews has taken place in Israel for decades. Four individuals—all university professors—and one group should be mentioned in this regard. First, Joseph Klausner (1874-1958) and David Flusser (1917-2000) were pioneers in the study of the historical Jesus and of Christianity; Ze’ev Falk (1923-1998) and Pinchas HaCohen Peli (1930-1989) were pioneers of dialogue.<sup>9</sup> They were among the distinguished members of the Jerusalem Rainbow Group, which has met continuously since 1965.<sup>10</sup> But for decades, dialogue remained within the purview of intellectual, and often, academic, elites, primarily in Jerusalem.

The International Council of Christians and Jews held two of its annual conferences in Israel—in Jerusalem in 1976 and in Haifa in 1993.<sup>11</sup> In 1991, Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish established the ICCI, the Inter-religious Coordinating Council in Israel, which became the local member organization of the ICCJ<sup>12</sup>. The Council promotes grass-roots dialogue not only in Jerusalem but around the country. Thus, for the past

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<sup>6</sup> This is how what was published as *Nostra Aetate* in October, 1965, was previously referred to, in some circles.

<sup>7</sup> Abbreviation for *Nostra Aetate*

<sup>8</sup> A medieval Hebrew word for Jewish “lobbyists,” who represented their communities before the non-Jewish authorities. It can have a negative connotation.

<sup>9</sup> I was privileged to have met Flusser, Falk and Peli; the latter two were mentors of mine.

<sup>10</sup> See: Peter Janssen, *Adventures in Dialogue: The Jerusalem Rainbow Group, Impressions of 45 Years of Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, Lee Achim Sefarim: Jerusalem, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> William Simpson and Ruth Weyl, *The Story of the ICCJ*, ICCJ, published in London, 2010, pp. 33-34, 84-85

<sup>12</sup> There had also been another member organization called the Israel Interfaith Association, but that group has ceased to function.

23 years, dialogue has spread slightly into broader segments of the population, although it is still a marginal phenomenon. Many of the Christians active within the ICCI are Europeans or North Americans, some of whom are in Israel only temporarily. Several years ago, the late Daniel Rossing started an organization called the JCJCR—Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations—to promote the relationship between local Jews and local, mostly Palestinian, Christians.

Certainly, the major turning point in Catholic-Israeli relations was in 1993, when, as a response to the Oslo process, the Vatican recognized the State of Israel. The process that led up to this and its ramifications are far beyond the scope of the present paper. We will, however, comment briefly on the three papal visits.<sup>13</sup>

Pope John XXIII died in 1963, to be succeeded by Pope Paul VI, who presided over the rest of Vatican II. In early 1964, Pope Paul went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the first ever. The focus of this pilgrimage was a meeting in Jerusalem with Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople and left little impression on the Israeli public. The two other papal pilgrimages, in 2000 and 2009, had a great impact on how Israeli Jews relate to Christianity. Pope John Paul II impressed the Israeli public with his charisma. Undoubtedly, his visits to Yad Vashem and the Western Wall were pivotal moments. Nothing in Pope Benedict's visit equaled them.

The difference between the two men is not only one of personal warmth and charisma. Pope Benedict XVI—formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—was and remains a theology professor; his predecessor, Karol Jozef Wojtyła, before entering the Polish seminary, had been an actor and a playwright and remained the master of the symbolic gesture. But many forget that even he, in the late 1980's, was the target of much Jewish criticism for his welcome to the Vatican of former Nazi Kurt Waldheim. In retrospect, Pope John Paul II seems to have been so admired by Jews, that they are unaware of the more complex and controversial aspects of his Papacy. It is also important to bear in mind that the general mood in 2000 regarding the prospects for peace in the region was much more optimistic than in 2009, an Intifada and several wars later.

At the time of the writing of this piece, there is a new Pope, Francis, a native of Argentina. He probably has more positive personal and professional ties with the Jewish community of Buenos Aires than any previous Pope has ever had with his home community. During a June 2013 meeting with Israel's Deputy

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<sup>13</sup> See my article, "Jewish Perspectives on Pope Benedict XVI's Visit to the Holy Land," in *Pope Benedict XVI in the Holy Land*, Paulist Press: NY, 2011, pp. 153-159

Foreign minister Ze'ev Elkin, Pope Francis indicated that he is also interested in visiting Israel. If such a visit takes place, that may impact significantly on the level of knowledge and interest among Israeli Jews regarding the Catholic Church.

Among contemporary Israeli Jews, there seem to be two opposing trends. On the one hand, there has been an alarming rise in anti-Christian incidents within Israel, often identified with the slogan, "*Tag M'hir*" (price tag.) These are usually acts of vandalism and graffiti directed at both Muslim and Christian institutions. Sometimes, individual Christians have been spat upon. While these acts are committed by a tiny, extremist minority within the Jewish community, the Israeli police have recognized the sufficient seriousness of the phenomenon by setting up, in the spring of 2013, a special unit to deal with it.

At the same time, within the wider Jewish community, there are active efforts to rectify the situation, at least of ignorance, mentioned above. The organization that Daniel Rossing started, mentioned earlier (JCJCR,) has done some important educational work for the Israeli public. For example, they organized a program on May 30, 2013, in conjunction with the Jerusalem institute for Israel Studies, a well-respected research facility in Jerusalem. The theme of the evening was the Second Vatican Council. The audience was a general one, with people who are not necessarily academics or clerics.

The participants were Ms. Hana Bendkowski, Program Director of the JCJCR; Raymond Cohen, professor emeritus from the Hebrew University's department of international relations, with a specialization in the recent history of the Vatican; Father Dr. David Neuhaus, a Jesuit who is the Assistant to the Latin Patriarch and has responsibility for Hebrew-speaking Catholics in Israel; and Dr. Amnon Ramon, an Israeli-born researcher, considered one of the major experts on the local Christian communities. As he said, the evening was organized because "most of the Israeli public thinks that nothing really happened." Ramon attributed the ignorance and relative apathy to two major factors: the influence of the unfortunate historical relationship between the Church and the Jews, and—what he called—"Israeli provincialism."

In addition to the ICCI and the JCJCR, there is now the Galilee Center for Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations, at The Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, just outside of Afula, directed by Dr. Faydra Schapira. The prestigious Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem has inaugurated a multi-disciplinary Seminar for Christian-Jewish Relations and is co-sponsoring a public lectures series together with the ICCI.<sup>14</sup> The Shalom Hartman institute in Jerusalem has promoted theological dialogue. It is to be hoped that these

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<sup>14</sup> In the interest of fair disclosure: at the opening of this series in February 2014, I shared a platform with the local Lutheran Bishop, Dr. Mounib Younan, who is also President of the Lutheran World Federation.

and similar initiatives will not remain purely on the academic level but will filter down to educational programs for the wider public. In that way, the impact of *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent developments within the Church may finally become known and recognized in Israel.

### **Diaspora Involvement and Responses**

A Diaspora Jew, French historian Jules Isaac (1907-1963) may have been the single individual most responsible for the provenance of NA. Having seen most of his family murdered in the Holocaust, he attended the Seelisberg Conference in 1947, which issued the Ten Points<sup>15</sup> and inaugurated the ICCJ (International Council of Christians and Jews.)

The outstanding personality of the conference...was Professor Jules Isaac, whose study of the Christian roots of antisemitism, "Jesus et Israel," was about to be published. He was later to play an important role, through his meetings with Pope Pius XII and Pope John XXIII, in paving the way for major changes in Catholic teaching and practice concerning Jews.<sup>16</sup>

Isaac coined the phrase "*l'enseignement du mepris*;" the "teaching of contempt," to characterize the Church's position over the centuries. In June of 1960, he had a private audience with Pope John XXII.

"This meeting is generally credited with being a major impetus for the pope's decision to direct Cardinal Augustin Bea, on September 18, 1960, to draft a declaration on the Catholic Church's relationship to the Jewish people for the upcoming Second Vatican Council. This was the genesis of what would become *Nostra Aetate*."<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, both Isaac and the Pope died in 1963, neither living to see the fruits of their labor.

One of the Jews most involved behind-the-scenes at Vatican II was Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972,) a leading American Jewish teacher, writer and thinker. Although personally Orthodox, he taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary, the center of American Conservative Judaism, at the time, the largest and most influential Jewish religious movement in the US.

There were meetings with many Church leaders and, at one point, in March 1963, a remarkable meeting with Cardinal Bea at AJC headquarters in New York. Among those accompanying the cardinal were Msgr. Johannes Willebrands, who served as secretary of Cardinal Bea's Vatican II Secretariat, and Father Felix Morlion, president of Rome's Pro Deo University. Heschel served as chairman of the gathering. With him were AJC (American Jewish Committee—D.W.) officers as well as Jewish leaders affiliated with institutions such as the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Rabbinical Seminary of America, the Synagogue Council of America, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and Yeshiva University. In light of the press reports he had seen, Heschel felt compelled to issue a forceful statement. In it, he referred to wording in the draft then under consideration that spoke of reaching for "reciprocal understanding and appreciation." He then declared: "Spiritual fratricide

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<sup>15</sup> See [www.iccj.org](http://www.iccj.org)

<sup>16</sup> Simpson and Weyl, op. cit., p. 23

<sup>17</sup> [www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources](http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources)

is hardly a means for the attainment” of these goals.<sup>18</sup>

In 1965, Heschel delivered a major address at Union Theological Seminary,<sup>19</sup> “No religion is an island.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, he supported inter-action and dialogue among people of different faiths, but with an expectation that the integrity of each distinct faith would not be challenged. This inaugurated an era of fruitful dialogue among Christians and, for the most part, non-Orthodox Jews.

In the early 1970’s, the Vatican initiated the International Liaison Committee for dialogue with the Jews. The Catholic side is represented by the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry. In response to the establishment of this Commission, the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Relations (IJCIR) was established to represent world Jewry to the Holy See.<sup>21</sup>

Within the American Orthodox Jewish community, two of the leading theologians opposed the dialogue, but in two very different ways. The better-known of the two was Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, generally considered the doyen of American Modern Orthodoxy. Soloveitchik delivered an essay titled “Confrontation” at the 1964 Mid-Winter Conference of the Rabbinic Council of America, the national body of Orthodox rabbis, addressing the question of how his community should respond to requests by Christians to enter into dialogue. It later appeared in the leading Orthodox journal, *Tradition*.<sup>22</sup> The essay has “widely been understood by his followers as limiting Jewish-Christian relations to matters of practical cooperation and as opposing theological dialogue.”<sup>23</sup>

The Rabbinical Council immediately adopted a statement rejecting any interreligious discussion not based on “the full independence, religious liberty and freedom of conscience of each faith community.” In February 1966, the Council adopted a more concrete statement formulated by Rabbi Soloveitchik that called for Jewish-Christian cooperation “in the public world of humanitarian and cultural endeavors...on such topics as War and Peace, Poverty, Freedom, ... Moral Values, ...Secularism, Technology... , Civil Rights, etc.” But it rejected dialogue on areas of faith, religious law, doctrine and ritual. Following Rabbi Soloveitchik’s argument in “Confrontation,” it encouraged discussion of areas of universal concern, but rejected as futile and even dangerous discussion of the private realms specific to individual faith communities.

This February 1966 statement came only months after the Second Vatican Council’s promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* with its radical rethinking of Catholic theology about Jews and Judaism and its authoritative rejection of many of

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<sup>18</sup> Gary Spruch, *Wide Horizons: Abraham Joshua Heschel, AJC and the Spirit of Nostra Aetata*, published by AJC: 2008, pp. 12-15

<sup>19</sup> Union Theological and JTS are across-the-street neighbors in Upper Manhattan, NY. They have together pioneered in inter-religious dialogue on the institutional level and continue to do so. Interestingly, UTS describes itself as having “roots that are firmly planted in the Protestant, Reformed tradition;” yet as of 2012, the Dean of Academic Affairs is Roman Catholic Sister Mary C. Boys, a leading theologian of the Jewish-Christian relationship.

<sup>20</sup> See the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 21:1966.

<sup>21</sup> Since then it has branched out to dialogue with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the World Council of Churches.

<sup>22</sup> 6/2, Spring-Summer 1964, pp. 5-29

<sup>23</sup> Raphael Jospe, “Preface,” in Janssen, op.cit., p.8

the bases of Christian antisemitism as well as any actions based on them. *Nostra Aetate* called for finding understanding with Jews through “biblical and theological enquiry” and through “friendly discussions.” In the process of preparing this document, the Vatican had sought just such dialogue with Jewish leaders. This itself was unprecedented for a Church that had previously used most such “dialogues” as attempts to convert Jews. “Confrontation” responded to this new situation of *Nostra Aetate* in the making, offering guidance to a community that, fresh from the fires of the Holocaust, was understandably uncertain as to how to respond to these friendly overtures. The 1966 rabbinic statement confirmed that these teachings were the accepted policy of the modern Orthodox community in America.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the apparent ban on theological dialogue, some of the most prominent Orthodox Jewish figures in inter-religious dialogue in North America (and, for several of them later, in Israel), were all students of Soloveitchik. Their dialogues have included serious theological components. These figures, including Shlomo Riskin, Irving Greenberg, Eugene Korn, and the late David Hartman, found ways to get around whatever prohibitions their teacher may have stipulated. Perhaps somewhat ironically, Soloveitchik himself delivered what is arguably his most influential theological treatise—“The Lonely Man of Faith” – to a Roman Catholic audience at St. John’s Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts, in 1964.<sup>25</sup>

David Rosen, perhaps the most prominent Orthodox rabbi in the dialogue with the Vatican, has said:

As a European and an Israeli I had been unaware of “the Soloveitchik line” until after I became Chief Rabbi of Ireland and was already deeply immersed in Jewish-Christian relations both in the field and in academia. However when I learned of it, it seemed to me to be very questionable, precisely from a Jewish viewpoint. The very idea of “theology” as something set apart, is debatable from a Jewish perspective. Precisely because Judaism sees everything in relation to the Divine, even the discussion of the weather between believers, is a theological discussion. It seems to me to be quite artificial to make a distinction between social and political issues on the one hand and theological on the other. Indeed as a religious Zionist, I would present issues relating to Israel as a most glaring example of such inextricability! In fact it seems to me that this is what the prophet Malachi indicates in Ch. 3 v. 16 when he describes Divine approval (and record) of the very conversation of believers.<sup>26</sup>

Two other European Orthodox rabbis prominent in inter-religious dialogue have been Michael Melchior, a Danish-born Israeli, and former Chief Rabbi of Britain, Jonathan Sacks, neither of whom studied directly under Soloveitchik.

Less well-known than Soloveitchik, but still influential was philosopher and community rabbi Eliezer Berkovits (1908-1992.) Berkovits was a creative Halakhist<sup>27</sup> and a liberal on many issues, such as women’s roles within Judaism, but a hard-liner when it came to dialogue with Christians. Shortly after

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<sup>24</sup> “Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik on Interreligious Dialogue: Forty Years Later; Introduction,” November 23, 2003, [www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research\\_sites](http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites)

<sup>25</sup> Jospe, op.cit.

<sup>26</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>27</sup> Halakha is Jewish religious law.

Vatican II he wrote that the Catholics had shown a “lack of sensitivity to historic truth...A non-Christian...is not impressed.”<sup>28</sup>

The schema on the Jews has now been officially promulgated by the Vatican Council. It has thought fit to declare solemnly before all the world that the Jews are not to be considered a people accursed by God; the Jews are not collectively guilty for the death of Jesus. We cannot help wondering whether in the opinion of the leaders of the Church these are still the Middle Ages...<sup>29</sup>

Berkovits was not at all a sectarian Orthodox Jew (what is sometimes called “ultra-Orthodox.”) He rejected a ghettoized existence and supported the extensive study of secular subjects, having himself earned a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Berlin. But for him, inter-religious dialogue, theological or other, was not on the agenda.

### **Reciprocity and its Complications**

From the beginning, some Jews felt a need for some type of reciprocal Jewish gesture. The above-mentioned Berkovits was so unimpressed with NA that he wrote the following, somewhat harshly:

At one point, when it seemed that the Vatican Council was about to exonerate the Jewish people completely of the guilt of deicide, there were some precipitate Reform rabbis who felt that the Jews ought to reciprocate such a noble gesture by acknowledging Jesus as a prophet. It would seem to us that if there were to be any reciprocating Jewish acknowledgment it should be commensurate with the Christian pronouncement. It might be said, for example, that the appropriate reciprocating gesture on the part of Jewry could be a solemn declaration that the man who endured the crucifixion is not to be regarded as accursed by God. Of course, Jews will never issue such a declaration...nor do they suffer from the illusion that they personally and humanly represent God on earth.”<sup>30</sup>

There were less “precipitate” Reform and Liberal rabbis. Walter Jacob shared Berkovits’ caution, if not his hostility: “The best witness to the pace of change within Christianity is Vatican II, which considered some aspects of the Jewish-Christian relationship only after six million Jews had been killed. Even the much lauded statement on the Jews and the crucifixion remains mild and came only after much argument.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Judaism in the Post-Christian Era (1966),” in F.E. Talmadge (ed.), *Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Jewish-Christian Encounter*, K’tav: NY, 1975, pp. 288-289

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.288

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 289-290

<sup>31</sup> *Christianity through Jewish Eyes: The Quest for Common Ground*, Hebrew Union College Press, 1974, p. 229



Leon Klenicki (1930-2009), a leading figure in inter-religious dialogue circles, wrote that “The initial reactions to *Nostra Aetate* within the Jewish community were mixed, ranging from total negativism and prudent criticism to reserved acceptance and enthusiasm.”<sup>32</sup> In terms of his own view, he stated:

“Certain temptations must be avoided; for instance, total negativism regarding the possibilities and future of the dialogue, based on past experiences. Another is self-pity for past persecutions and pains; those were very real events, unfortunate parts of Christian history. But self-righteousness is not an answer to the challenge of dialogue, one of the most difficult challenges to a religious person. The right Jewish attitude in this situation requires self-searching and a spirit of reconciliation. It entails recognition of the dialogue partner as a subject of faith, a child of God. It also calls for a perception of Christianity's role in bringing God's covenant to humanity following the obligation placed upon Noah, the biblical symbol for humankind. Through dialogue, Christianity must overcome the triumphalism of power, Judaism the triumphalism of pain.”<sup>33</sup>

Sharing his call for some kind of reciprocity were others among the non-Orthodox community in North America (and, as we have seen, even some of the Modern Orthodox themselves.) NA was seen as a step forward that necessitated a significant response. In 2000, an important statement was issued and signed by over 200 Jewish scholars and leaders, mostly North Americans, called *Dabru Emet* (Speak the Truth.)<sup>34</sup> The four academic scholars who crafted the document came from the Conservative and Reform wings of Judaism, as did most of the signers. Many Christians welcomed the document: “*Dabru Emet* ...proposes that Jews are called to respond...by re-evaluating their own religious positions and history vis-à-vis Christianity.”<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps regrettably, *Dabru Emet* has not become widely known in Jewish circles, outside clergy or academics directly involved in inter-religious dialogue. The four authors of *Dabru Emet*—David Novak, Peter Ochs, and the late Tykva Frymer-Kensky (1943-2006) and Michael Signer (1945-2009) —together with their colleague David Sandmel—edited a book called *Christianity in Jewish Terms*.<sup>36</sup> In response to what they call “a dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish and Christian relations,”<sup>37</sup> they add, “...we believe it is time for Jews to learn about the efforts of Christians to honor Judaism. We believe it is time for Jews to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity.”<sup>38</sup>

*Dabru Emet* was not without its critics. Predictably, some felt it did not go far enough; others, that it went too far. Of the eight statements that comprised the document, one of the most controversial was

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<sup>32</sup> *Nostra Aetate : A Jewish View "From Disputation to Dialogue,"* [archive.adl.org/nr/exeres/a9659c0f/2958-4e48-8](http://archive.adl.org/nr/exeres/a9659c0f/2958-4e48-8)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> For the full text, see [www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=1014](http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=1014)

<sup>35</sup> K. Hannah Holtschneider, “Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,” [www.jnir.div.ed.ac.uk/Primary%20Sources](http://www.jnir.div.ed.ac.uk/Primary%20Sources)

<sup>36</sup> Westview Press: Boulder, Colorado, 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. ix

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. xv

the first, “Jews and Christians worship the same God.” One of the leading critics was Jon D. Levenson, in his piece, “How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue.”<sup>39</sup> Several months later, a group of Jewish and Christian scholars and dialogue activists wrote rejoinders.<sup>40</sup> One of them, Sister of Zion Margaret Shepherd, wrote:

After it (NA—D.W.) was issued in 1965, there was great disappointment and considerable anger at its omissions. Jews found no mention of either the Holocaust or Israel. They also found references to antisemitism that did not acknowledge any Christian responsibility for Jewish suffering...today, both Christians and Jews recognize NA as the beginning of a process of dialogue...”<sup>41</sup>

Presumably, Shepherd felt that *Dabru Emet* was the next step in the dialogue—it should be noted that *Dabru Emet* mentioned both the Holocaust and Israel. Nine years after that document, in 2009, the International Council of Christians and Jews issued the Berlin Document, “A Time for Re-commitment.”<sup>42</sup> This statement was ground-breaking, in that for the first time, in an inter-religious framework, there was a call upon Jews and Jewish communities to undertake a process of soul-searching. One of the core components of the Document is the 12 points or calls of Berlin—4 calls to Christians and the Churches, 4 calls to Jews and Jewish communities, and 4 calls for joint action, to which Muslims and others are invited to join. Involved in the formulation of the Berlin Document were four Israeli Jews and one (at-the-time) Israeli-based Christian, plus Jews and Christians from eleven other countries.<sup>43</sup> To the extent that the Berlin Document is known among Jews, its status has also been controversial, with much criticism for its so-called “washing dirty laundry in public.”

Point 5 of the 12 Berlin Points, the most relevant to the topic at hand, calls upon Jews and Jewish communities:

***5. To acknowledge the efforts of many Christian communities in the late 20th century to reform their attitudes toward Jews***

- f. By learning about these reforms through more intensive dialogue with Christians.
- f. By discussing the implications of changes in Christian churches regarding Jews and their understandings of Judaism.
- f. By teaching Jews of all ages about these changes, both in the context of the history of Jewish-Christian relations and according to the appropriate stage of education for each group.
- f. By including basic and accurate background information about Christianity in the curricula of Jewish schools, rabbinic seminaries and

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<sup>39</sup> Commentary, December 2001, Vol. 112/5, pp. 31-37.

<sup>40</sup> April 2002, Vol. 113/4, pp. 8-21.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> For the full document, go to [www.iccj.org](http://www.iccj.org).

<sup>43</sup> Again, in the interest of full disclosure, I was one of them.

adult education programs.

f. By studying the New Testament both as Christianity's sacred text and as literature written to a large degree by Jews in an historical-cultural context similar to early Rabbinic literature, thereby offering insight into the development of Judaism in the early centuries of the Common Era.

The ICCI mentioned above has promoted the translation of this document and others into Hebrew. It has also sponsored conferences in Israel about NA, *Dabru Emet*, and the Berlin Document. Other regional conferences about the Berlin Document have been held in North and South America, Australia-New Zealand, and several countries in Europe. Still, its impact has been limited largely to inter-religious dialogue circles. Finally, it can hardly be called "a Jewish response" to NA, as it was issued by an inter-religious organization.

If we wish to claim that there has been little, if any, Jewish response to *Nostra Aetate*, we could easily muster some compelling arguments:

- 1) Many Jews are still cynical about, and distrustful of, the organized Christian world. They realize that Christians have a great deal to repent for, vis-à-vis Jews. "For many centuries it was they who have been doing the persecuting, they who perpetrated abominable acts of inhumanity against the Jewish people, but now they condescend to tell the world that we are perhaps not guilty nor to be considered accursed by God."<sup>44</sup>
- 2) The Jewish community has no centralized, hierarchical authority. This may be a strength, in allowing for much religious freedom and innovation, but it can also be an obstacle to meaningful dialogue with hierarchical Church bodies. I have been asked in dialogue, "Whom do you represent?" Indeed, who is authorized to speak on behalf of the Jews and Judaism?
- 3) The expectation that the Jewish people will issue some sort of document that might be a reciprocal gesture to NA is, at best, naïve. The Jewish community does not operate with a notion of binding or authoritative documents promulgated by some central figure or group. Convening synods and councils and issuing proclamations is what Christians do, not what Jews do.
- 4) Somewhat related to point number 3 is the less theological character of Jewish religious involvement in general. We can take an example from the recent history of Jewish feminism. Although Christian feminists, such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Reuther had been writing on theological issues since the late 1960's and early 1970's, the first work of Jewish feminist

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<sup>44</sup> Berkovits, op. cit., p. 288.

theology came out only in 1990. In 1983, Judith Plaskow and Cynthia Ozick were still arguing over whether the right question is theological or sociological.<sup>45</sup>

Jewish scholar Adam Gregerman has written a masterful response to a talk given by the head of the Vatican's Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, Cardinal Kurt Koch. Cardinal Koch spoke at Seton Hall University on October 30, 2011, during the 10th Annual Meeting of the Council of Centers on Christian-Jewish Relations (a member organization of the ICCJ.)<sup>46</sup> His response is well worth reading in full—what follows are a few brief selections, relevant to our question of reciprocity:

The touchstone of all post-Shoah Catholic reflection is the path-breaking *Nostra Aetate*...Not only does Koch report on the results of internal Church discussions about Jews *to Jews* and others in these passages (as commonly happens in such statements), but he introduces a dialogical format that includes requests for a specific response *from Jews*...After asking something of Christians (that they re-call their rootedness in the Abrahamic covenant), he makes a reciprocal demand of Jews (that they recognize that their own view of the covenant might undermine God's universal purpose "for all peoples"). Koch's favorable statements about Judaism co-exist uneasily with a model of reciprocity that unfortunately is not Jewishly acceptable or genuinely dialogical...Koch puts Jews in a difficult position of either failing to reciprocate or breaking with central Jewish religious convictions. At the risk of seeming ungracious, I choose the former rather than the latter, for I am unwilling to heed some of his requests. This is disappointing to me, as I would like to respond as favorably as possible, especially in light of his (and the Catholic Church's) remarkable changes in teachings about Jews and Judaism.

Fortunately, I believe the problem is not with reciprocity *per se* ...This request, though almost never put in reciprocal terms, nonetheless appropriately reflects a sense that Christian views of Jews and Judaism have changed dramatically, and that Jews might reconsider their own views. Reciprocity is not a demand (and never a threat), but a reflection of a healthy relationship open to change. It is a dialogue worth continuing, as Koch says, and improving.<sup>47</sup>

Does that mean therefore that there has been and can be no Jewish response to NA?

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<sup>45</sup> Susannah Heschel (editor,) *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, Schocken Books: New York, 1983, pp. 120-151 and 223-233

<sup>46</sup> The full text of the address is available at [www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements](http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements)

<sup>47</sup> The article appears in *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/viewFile/2074/1811>. The full article has 13 pages; the quotations are from pp. 1, 4, 12.

## Responding as Jews

Jews and Christians not only have different approaches to major theological questions; they also have different modes of operation in the world. They not only *have* different theologies; they *do* theology differently. The study of sacred texts is, for Jews, not only an interesting intellectual exercise or even a way of gaining spiritual guidance. It is a form of religious worship, a commandment, an act of serving God. I will try to illustrate this. When I introduce a seminar on Jewish texts, especially for a Gentile group, I often begin with a humorous and slightly irreverent story:

One day, the Holy One, Blessed be He, looked down from Heaven to earth, to see how the Jewish people were behaving. He saw some Jews lying, stealing, cheating, or—Heaven forbid—doing even worse sins. He said, "Oh, my God," or whatever God would say on such an occasion, "I'm going to take back my *Torah*; you're not living by it anyway." So, first, there came rolling back to Heaven all the scrolls of the Torah, the Pentateuch, but then all the commentaries on the Torah, and all the poetry written on the commentaries, and the commentaries written on the poetry; the rest of the books of the Bible, and the commentaries on them; the corpus of *Midrash*, the legal commentary called the *Mishnah*, and all the commentaries on the *Midrash* and the *Mishnah*, the most famous one being the *Talmud*, and all the commentaries on the *Talmud*. Then, all the legal codes and the commentaries on the codes, all the philosophical works and all their commentaries, the mystical and homiletical literature, and, by this time, as you can guess, all the commentaries on them...Anyway, by now, Heaven was completely overflowing, and God said, "Take back my Torah; you've earned the right to keep it."<sup>48</sup>

The point of the story is that although Jews are human beings just like anyone else, and therefore, far from perfection, what has characterized Jewish culture for at least the past two millennia is an obsession with texts and their interpretation. Even today, in modern Israeli secular culture, many a poem, novel, play, dance performance, or film is based on Biblical and Rabbinic themes and allusions. The traditional love for the texts is expressed in a double and perhaps somewhat paradoxical way: on the one hand, the text is sacred and Jews show respect for it through many customs. For example, holy books are not to be put on the floor and, if they fall to the floor, Jews pick them up and kiss them. They study them "day and night."<sup>49</sup> But, on the other hand, they take the liberty of playing with the text, wrestling with it, even changing it, if need be, to make a point.

The People of the Book—or, perhaps, the Books—don't typically write documents. I would like to argue that the Jewish people have indeed responded to NA, in a typically Jewish way. Jews do not issue documents; they study texts, write commentaries on them, and then write commentaries upon the commentaries.

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<sup>48</sup> Despite my attempts, I have been unable to locate the source of this story.

<sup>49</sup> In the words of Joshua 1:8

Since the Second Vatican Council, Jews have written books and specifically, an impressive commentary on the New Testament. *This is what Jews do*.

The prime example of this is *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. This book, published in 2011,<sup>50</sup> is one of the highlights in the Jewish response. First of all, the editors brought together fifty Jewish scholars of the New Testament, religious studies and theology, to comment on the text of the New Testament and to add a series of essays on related topics. Such a work could not have been published as recently as 25 or 30 years ago, because there weren't yet enough Jewish scholars in the field. I would argue that these scholars came of age after NA and made their decisions about which academic fields to pursue, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. It is truly a significant milestone. It is to be hoped that the volume will both encourage more Christians to recognize the Jewish roots of Christianity and encourage more Jews to study the Christian Scriptures. This will, at best, not lead to syncretism but to a deeper and more meaningful relationship between Jews and Christians.

Secondly, this may be the most important such work to come out recently, but there are now whole shelves full of books written by Jewish scholars on Christianity, the New Testament, a Jewish theology of other religions, etc. These books and similar ones yet to be written can serve as the nucleus for Jewish curricula on Christianity and comparative religions in general. The non-Orthodox rabbinical seminaries, serving the majority of Diaspora Jews, regularly include comparative courses in world religions as part of their curricula. Within the Orthodox community, YCT—Yeshivat Chovevei Torah— a "Modern Open Orthodox" Yeshiva founded in 1999 --supports such study, as well. But in many Orthodox venues, the study of Christianity would still be "anathema" (to borrow a Christian term!)<sup>51</sup>

Finally, more Jews should become aware of the fact that, in learning more about Christianity, especially in its first two centuries, they will learn more about Judaism.

Franz Rosenzweig's notion that, while it is possible to understand oneself as a Jew absent knowledge of Christianity, it is impossible to understand oneself as a Christian absent knowledge of Judaism, must now be challenged.

In this serious reading of the New Testament, Jewish scholars are coming to understand that one of the sole records of the debates of the Jewish community in the first and second century of the Common Era is found in the New Testament.

If Jews are to gain an understanding of the development and flowering of the rabbinic period, evidence of who we

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<sup>50</sup> Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford Press: New York.)

<sup>51</sup> See Joseph Reimer, "No Religion is an Island: Teaching World Religions to Adolescents in a Jewish Educational Context," *Journal of Jewish Education* 79:4, pp.395-413

were and who we were not -- and what we debated about - is found in this primary source. And we Jews must lose our fear of reading, and learning from, the Christian scriptures.<sup>52</sup>

We can only hope that this will mark the beginning of a new era in the Jewish-Christian relationship—an era of mutual knowledge, understanding and cooperation.

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<sup>52</sup> Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor (ADL Director of Interfaith Affairs), "Unresolved Issues and Suggested Solutions," [http://archive.adl.org/main\\_interfaith/nostra\\_aetate](http://archive.adl.org/main_interfaith/nostra_aetate), 2005