



A Spiritual Home

What Christians should know about Jewish identity

Daniel F. Polish * | 30.04.2011

We live in a remarkable moment. After 2,000 years of distrust and enmity between the Jewish and Christian communities of faith, we have seen them discover dramatically new ways of encountering each other. Of profound consequence for Jews were the separate visits of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI to the State of Israel. Why is this so?

Around the world, representatives of the two communities regularly meet with collegiality and true friendship. Jews and Christians have collaborated on a range of social issues, and in formal dialogue they have engaged a remarkable breadth of issues in mutual respect and candor. Among them are Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ," the Good Friday prayers in the revived Tridentine rite and the 2009 note of the U.S. bishops on evangelization and mission. We have exchanged cultural histories of martyrdom and of the Holy Land, and together we have developed a film series for congregations, "Walking God's Paths," intended to educate adults of both our traditions about the practices and beliefs of the other.

Yet in the midst of the growing comity, the two communities stub their toes on a single issue: the State of Israel. Too often Israel has become a painful wedge in the deepening understanding between Jews and Christians. On this subject we seem to talk past one another or, worse, speak different languages. That failure of communication causes pain to both groups.

Certainly there are instances of clear communication when Israel is discussed constructively. But often the conversation between Jews and Christians does not reflect the reality that Israel and the issues it brings in its wake mean profoundly different things to Jews and Christians.

To me, as a Jew, Christian discussion of Israel seems to exist in the realm of social issues and foreign policy, deprived of spiritual significance. For Jews, however, even Jews who take issue with policies of the Israeli government, Israel carries very different significance. When believing Jews hear believing Christians speak of Israel, they do not hear those Christians express appreciation for the extent to which Israel plays a fundamentally spiritual role in the lives of Jews.

Love, Pain and Miscommunication

What is at stake in this miscommunication is of great consequence for the relationship of Jews and Christians. A story that Martin Buber attributes to the Hasidic master Moshe Leib of Sasov captures the conflicted feelings in this relationship. Moshe Leib told of overhearing some peasants at an inn. After much drinking, one of the peasants asked another, "Do you love me?" His companion replied, "Of course I love you; I love you very much." To which the first retorted, "You say you love me, but if you really loved me, you would know what pains me."

I have been pained by the actions of religious communities that have been partners of the Jewish community in dialogue. One is the embrace by many Protestant denominations, though few American Catholics, of the 2009 "Kairos Palestine" document. This statement by Palestinian Christian religious leaders condemns Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands "as a sin against God and humanity" and declares "nonviolent resistance to this injustice is a right and a duty of all Palestinians including Christians," but in doing so it sets out an offensive disconnection between Jews and the Land of Israel as the cradle of our civilization.

Then there was the Vatican's tepid rebuke of Exarch Cyril Salim Butros, a Greek Melkite archbishop from Boston, who declared at the conclusion of the Synod of Bishops of the Middle East at the Vatican in October 2010: "The Holy Scriptures cannot be used to justify the return of Jews to Israel and the displacement of the Palestinians, to justify the occupation by Israel of Palestinian lands.... We Christians cannot speak of the 'promised land' as an exclusive right for a privileged Jewish people. This promise was nullified by Christ.... There is no longer a chosen people—all men and women of all countries have become the chosen people...." This came 45 years after the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on Non-Christian Religions," which opened a new age in Jewish-Catholic relations rooted in our common biblical heritage.

No less distressing was the theological prologue of the draft statement of the Middle East study team of the Presbyterian Church; the prologue seemed to seek to disconnect Jews from their own historical past and deny them their self-understanding. In stating that Jews have no intrinsic connection to the land of their historical experience, and in making relative their association with it, the document creates a picture of Jewish identity in which Jews can hardly recognize themselves.

All of these communities of faith have histories of dialogue with the Jewish community, yet all seem unaware (I would rather assume ignorance than indifference) of the profound nature of the role that Israel plays in the spiritual lives of Jews. For Catholics, the offense these incidents gives to Jews ought to be a special concern because they seem to deny Jews their own experience of Israel. The 1974 Vatican "Guidelines for Religious Relations with the Jews" proposed that Christians "learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in light of their own religious experience." For Catholics, then, Jews' own perception of the religious significance of the modern state of Israel ought to have a certain weight in how Catholics respond to developments there.

First a caveat: It is important to stress that for Jews the emotional gravitational pull to Israel has nothing to do with the actions or policies of any Israeli government. It is felt equally by those who applaud a particular government or set of policies and by those who despair of that government or policies. Something more profound is going on.

Second, an appreciation of what Israel means to Jews cannot imply that Israel is beyond criticism. There is enough to criticize about actions of the government of Israel. Jews who do so are often belittled as "self-hating"; Christians who do so are often dismissed as anti-Semites. These accusations are often profoundly wrong in both cases. The challenge for Christians who want to speak to Israel's shortcomings is to begin with an awareness of the role it plays in the emotional lives of their Jewish friends and partners in dialogue and to address the realities of political Israel in that context.

Facing Jerusalem

The power that Israel exercises over the emotional lives of Jews finds physical expression, for me, in a compass I once saw whose needle pointed not to the north, but consistently in the direction of Jerusalem. One of the leaders of Reform Judaism (whose career began at the time when the Reform movement was virulently anti-Zionist) stipulated in his will that his gravestone be inscribed with a quotation from the Medieval Spanish-Jewish poet Yehudah Halevi, "My heart is in the East and I am in the West." What is the nature of this magnetic pull that Israel exerts on Jewish hearts?

On the simplest level, the power that Israel exerts over Jews finds a parallel in a poignant reminiscence by Barack Obama in his book *Dreams From My Father*. He writes of his first visit to Kenya: "all of this while a steady procession of black faces passed before your eyes...for a span of weeks or months you could experience the freedom that comes from not feeling watched.... Here the world was black, and so you were just you."

Replace the word black with the word Jewish, and you have a vivid articulation of what the Jew feels

when in Israel. It is a kind of exhaling, even when you did not know you were holding your breath. The most assimilated Jew can relate to this sense of being surrounded by people who bear the same label as you, who share something profound and fundamental with you. Even Jews far removed from their identity will speak, often in wonder, of the intensity of the feeling of being at home.

On a deeper level Jews resonate with Israel in terms of the collective life of the people. No Jew of any age is unaware that our lives are brands plucked from the fire of the Holocaust. Consciously or not, for all Jews Israel embodies the notion of resurrection. The arbiters of Jewish religious practice cannot have been oblivious of what they were conveying when they established Yom HaShoah/the day of commemorating the holocaust, exactly one week before Yom HaAtzma'ut/Israel's Independence Day—both of them in the season of rebirth and renewal. Can any organism survive the loss of one third of its corpus? Though it is painful to say so close to the events, I suspect later generations will embrace the idea that the people of Israel would have perished from the trauma of the Shoah had not it been given a new handhold on life by the project of reclaiming its ancient home.

Post-Independence Jewish Identity

The existence of Israel has changed what it means to be a Jew, whether one lives there or not. This was intuited in 1948 by the poet Karl Shapiro:

When I see the name of Israel high in print
The fences crumble in my flesh; I sink
Deep in a Western chair and rest my soul....

This very redefined sense of self may have made it possible for Jews to participate more comfortably in interfaith dialogue and, paradoxically, engage more unfetteredly in cultural and political life. Today they feel a part, not apart.

Israel possesses an incarnational dimension. It embodies the totality of the experience and the message of the Jewish people. When Jews visit Spain, they find it beautiful and charming, but Spain's history is not theirs. Even though the Jews' expulsion from Spain in 1492 is a traumatic memory for all, Spain is not essential to Jewish identity in the way Israel is. It does not talk to them of how they came to be as they are.

When Jews visit Israel, its landscape and historical sites speak in more intimate terms. It is the embodiment of the Jews' collective past, situating us in our history and evoking its meaning. One might almost say that Israel functions for Jews in the same way that Communion functions for a Catholic. Toward the middle of the 20th century, the leaders of the Soviet Union famously denigrated Jews as rootless cosmopolitans. The existence of Israel annuls any possibility of understanding Jews in that way again.

Israel offers Jews something they have not had since the year 70, the last expulsion from the land and the inception of its existence as a diaspora people: what the philosopher Emil Fackenheim calls "the Jewish return to history." Fackenheim implies that the existence of a Jewish state offers Jews the chance to apply the teachings of their tradition on a broader plain than they had when they were a marginal, pariah people existing at the sufferance of others, acted upon but denied the opportunity to be actors on the world stage. A Jewish state offers Jews the chance to be no longer the pathetic inheritors of an attenuated tradition of diminishing significance. It offers them the opportunity to be part of a people charged with expressing its culture in ever new forms, a living, dynamic organism rather than a static, petrified museum piece.

The Pain of Historical Existence

That call to re-enter history evokes and explains the pain many Jews feel when that state does not

succeed in embodying the ideals of the inherited teaching, when its Jewishness is merely one of demography rather than character. Theodore Herzl, the “Father of modern Zionism,” famously said, “If you will it, it is no dream.” But the dream of Israel that animated those who built it and animates Jewish aspirations for it still, is not of a “normal” state like all the others, a state whose shortcomings are to be accepted as the “price” of realpolitik in a “dangerous neighborhood.”

Asher Ginzberg, who wrote under the pen name Achad Ha’Am, dreamed of a Jewish state that would embody the millennia-old values of the Jewish people. This state would be a light to the nations in the way it conducted its collective life, a state that offered a vision of what every state might be. That dream gives us permission to be pained by the distance between what Israel might be and what it is at this moment. That dream challenges us to right what is wrong. And that dream moves our engagement with Israel beyond simple “support” to profound, life-encompassing commitment.

For the Jew, then, engagement with Israel is bound up with our past, present and future; it is beyond the realm of the political. It is a relationship we cannot expect non-Jews to share. But we hope that our Christian friends and dialogue partners will speak and act in ways that reflect an awareness of how much that engagement means to Jews.

Editorial remarks

*Rabbi Daniel F. Polish leads Congregation Shir Chadash in New York’s Hudson Valley. His latest book is *Talking About God* (SkyLight Paths Publishing), 2011 America Press Inc. Copyright: [America](#). The National Catholic Weekly, April 11, 2011. Used with kind permission. Many thanks to Rabbi Daniel Polish and Drew Christiansen, S.J. (Editor in Chief, America).