Interreligious Bridges and Barriers

View PDF

Rabbi Mark Diamond is Director of the Los Angeles region of the American Jewish Committee (AJC). He previously served as Executive Vice President of the Board of Rabbis of Southern California and as rabbi of congregations in metropolitan San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. Rabbi Diamond has led interfaith delegations on trips to the Vatican and Israel and has lectured on interfaith relations at seminaries and universities. He is the immediate past president of the Los Angeles Council of Religious Leaders and is a board member of the Los Angeles World Affairs Council. This article appears in issue 20 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

My passion for interreligious engagement1 is due in no small measure to my family's journeys. I am the grandson of immigrants who fled persecution in Eastern Europe and settled in Chicago. Their contacts with Christian neighbors were limited and not especially positive. As youngsters growing up in Chicago, my parents learned firsthand about anti-Semitism and the dangers of taking shortcuts through unfriendly neighborhoods.

I grew up in a middle-class Chicago suburb with both Christian and Jewish friends. I was thrilled when my high school Spanish teacher invited me to join 15 students and teachers on a trip to Mexico over the winter vacation. My elation turned to shock and indignation when my Zeida—a proud shohet and fervently observant Jew—warned my parents not to let me go, lest I enter a church and betray my faith and my people. "They will make him a goy," Zeida admonished my mother.

I was a rebellious teenager aided and abetted by loving parents, who embodied the religious and cultural melting pot that was America's holy grail in the 1960s. I ignored my grandfather's solemn warning and made

three trips to Mexico during my high school years, touring numerous churches and cathedrals on each visit. Ironically, those trips helped renew my own Jewish faith, informed my subsequent decision to enter the rabbinate, and kindled a lifelong interest in interreligious endeavors.

As a teenager, I thought my grandfather's views were silly and naïve. Years later, I came to understand that my Zeida embodied his milieu, with formative years in a Kiev rife with anti-Semitic persecution and adult years in a racially, ethnically, and religiously divided Chicago. Zeida could not conceive of a world where Jews and members of other faith communities join together for interreligious dialogue and engagement. His grandson lives nearly five decades after the seminal Vatican proclamation Nostra Aetate opened the doors of interreligious cooperation and commitment.

I am often asked why Jews should expend limited resources in the quest to forge bonds with other religious communities. We participate in this work because it is an intrinsic component of our Jewish DNA. In the celebrated rabbinic debate about what constitutes the greatest Torah teaching,2 Ben Azzai trumps Rabbi Akiba's choice of "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) with his own citation, "This is the book of the generations of Adam; when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God" (Gen. 5:1). We may find it challenging to love our neighbors, but we bear a common lineage and a shared mandate to see the divine image in them. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:

Every great faith has within it harsh texts which, read literally, can be taken to endorse narrow particularism, suspicion of strangers and intolerance toward those who believe differently than we do. Every great faith also has within it sources that emphasize kinship with the stranger, empathy with the outsider, and courage that leads people to extend a hand across boundaries of estrangement and hostility. The choice is ours. Will the generous texts of our tradition serve as interpretative keys to the rest, or will the abrasive passages determine our ideas of what we are called to do? . . . I believe we are being called by God to see in the human other a trace of the divine Other.3

Interreligious outreach is consistent with our core Jewish values and ideals. It is not only the righteous course of action; it is the intelligent course of action. Worldwide, the Jewish population is estimated to be 0.22 percent of the global population.4 Utilizing the core definition of Jewish identity in the Pew Research Center's 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews, Jews con-

stitute 2.2 percent of the adult U.S. population.5 In my own city, the large

and vibrant Jewish community represents 4 percent of the population of metropolitan Los Angeles.

One need only do the math of the demographic equations to recognize the import of interfaith engagement. Since its founding in 1906, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) has placed special emphasis on advancing interreligious and intergroup relations in America and across the globe. AJC leaders understand that the well-being of the Jewish community is tied to that of other faith groups. Whether our interfaith outreach is prompted by enlightened self-interest, altruism, or both factors, we serve the Jewish people well when we engage our neighbors in discourse, education, and advocacy.

Today we find a seemingly endless array of programs and projects in the interreligious arena. Prof. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook of Claremont School of Theology identifies four models of interreligious encounter, which she calls dialogues of life, action, spiritual experience, and understanding.[6] Interfaith programs include bilateral (e.g., Catholic-Jewish) and multilateral (e.g., Christian-Jewish-Muslim) conversations, joint religious celebrations and worship services, text study, social action projects, pulpit exchanges, seminars and conferences for clergy and academics, interfaith study tours, and many others. These experiences share one or both of two goals—to build bridges of respect and understanding of the religious beliefs and practices of others, and to forge coalitions based on shared values of democracy, pluralism, and human rights. To that end, I offer three guidelines to foster meaningful interreligious engagement.

1. We are all children of God, but we do not all share the same narratives, beliefs, and practices.

We need to dig deeper in interfaith projects and programs. A friendship circle of well-intentioned people holding hands and singing Kumbaya does not qualify as a productive interreligious encounter. Planners of interfaith worship services tend to aim for the lowest common denominator of each participating faith community, and become boring, pareve exercises in the process. I much prefer to be an observer at worship services and rituals of other religious faiths, even as I invite their adherents to do likewise in the Jewish community. Thoughtful interreligious engage-

ment highlights not only commonalities, but historical, theological, and textual differences as well.

The year 2015 marks a half-century of sustained and dramatic interfaith progress in the afterglow of Nostra Aetate and the faithful leadership

of bold pioneers and their heirs in the interreligious arena. When we engage religious interlocutors, we must never forget the sordid history of interfaith relations in the first two millennia. In the Christian world, anti-Semitism, persecution, death, and destruction—often carried out in Jesus' name—largely marked relations with Jews. Blood libels, accusations of well poisoning, devil worship, host desecration, and other alleged crimes inspired pogroms, murder, rape, and the forced conversion of Jews and Jewish communities. This was the tragic prelude to the systematic murder of 6 million Jewish men, women, and children at the hands of the Nazis and their henchmen. Even as we lift up narratives of righteous Gentiles who demonstrated kindness and compassion in the face of evil, we cannot allow others to erase or minimize the prevailing interfaith legacy of hatred and intolerance in word and deed.

2. Interreligious dialogue is enhanced by the participation of individuals who understand, respect, and love their own faith traditions and communal institutions.

It is easy to find a sympathetic cleric or adherent who purports to represent a given faith community and agrees with the public or private agenda of an interfaith program's sponsors. Self-proclaimed religious leaders or those who have left their own faith are ready and willing to fill the bill. This interfaith "cherry-picking" is at best naïve, and at worse misguided and dangerous. We recoil when a messianic Jewish "rabbi" is invited to preach and teach Torah at an ecumenical or interfaith event, or Jews who call for Israel's dismantling are invited to speak on behalf of the Jewish community at church assemblies and interfaith gatherings.

We err when we relegate the interreligious arena to fringe groups and marginal individuals. We err when we avoid difficult issues, such as proselytization
and the centrality of Israel in Jewish life and thought, in our interfaith dialogues. Serious interreligious conversation is predicated upon the active participation of leaders who are faithful to their own norms and ways. In the Jewish world, this translates into the active participation of a

broad swath of rabbinic and communal leaders—conservative and progressive; clergy and laity; Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Reform. While I respect and appreciate the special halakhic and institutional challenges faced by Orthodox colleagues in this regard, Jewish interreligious engagement is diminished when they are not at the table.

The path of interreligious engagement will be strewn with bumps and

barriers.
The historic rapprochement in Catholic-Jewish relations since Nostra Aetate has seen major obstacles along the way—the establishment of a Carmelite convent on the grounds of Auschwitz, the beatification of Edith Stein, the expected sainthood of Pope Pius XII despite his controversial role in the Holocaust, and Pope Benedict XVI's reinstatement of Bishop Richard Williamson, among others. Sustained progress in interfaith relations will also be marked by setbacks and controversies, as befits all complex, evolving relationships. The challenge is how to build interreligious relationships and partnerships that enable participants to overcome bumps and barriers with wisdom and sekhel.
One valuable lesson for Jews engaged in interreligious work is the realization that it is not always about us. Faith communities and their leaders have multiple agendas and reasons for doing what they do. To cite one example, Jewish relations and concerns are not always first and foremost on the Vatican's list of priorities. The Pope does not awaken each morning wondering what "the Jews" will think of his edicts and actions. Nor do cardinals, archbishops, bishops, judicatory officials, and clergy of other religious denominations place our interests at the top of their respective agendas. We should never refrain from speaking out when the doctrines and practices of others harm our interests and impair our relations with them. At the same time, we must do our homework to avoid sweeping generalizations about their faiths and to gain a better understanding of the diverse texts, theologies and polities of our interlocutors.
Narratives of communal and individual achievements in the interreligious arena should motivate us to redouble efforts to build bridges with other faith communities. In the spring of 2014, the Los Angeles region of the American Jewish Committee partnered with the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to sponsor a groundbreaking seminar on Latino-Jewish relations.
5
Mark S. Diamond
"Exploring Bonds, Celebrating Traditions: A Day of Learning and Dialogue for Rabbis and Latino Priests" brought together 35 Jewish and Latino Catholic clergy for study and reflection. The Jewish cohort included Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform congregational rabbis, faculty members of seminaries and universities, and leaders of communal organizations. The Latino Catholic cohort included an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese, parish priests, administrators and leaders of Catholic institutions and social service organizations.
Keynote presenter Rabbi Marc D. Angel shared his experiences growing

up in a proud, vibrant Sephardic Jewish community in Seattle. Rabbi Angel's personal narrative and his insights into Sephardic life, Ladino language, and minority acculturation led to robust roundtable conversations during the seminar. Rabbis and priests discussed and debated issues of faith, relations between diaspora communities and their homelands, immigration reform, and myths and stereotypes about "the other" among Latinos and Jews, especially anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant views. Rabbi Angel urged participants to find the delicate balance that connects these two minority groups and their respective concerns about maintaining traditions while remaining open to change and progress.

The rabbi-Latino priest seminar elicited positive evaluations from participants and a call for future collaborative programs. "Exploring Bonds, Celebrating Traditions" is an example of "top-down" interfaith engagement spearheaded by two communal partners with a long history of collaboration. We conclude with an example of a personal relationship that literally changed the course of history—Karol Wojtyla's childhood friendship with a Jewish boy named Jerzy Kluger.7 Their hometown of Wadowice, Poland was 80 percent Catholic and 20 percent Jewish, and the Wojtyla and Kluger families fostered and encouraged their sons' close friendship.

"Jurek" Kluger and "Lolek" Wotyla remained lifelong friends, and their relationship strengthened when Kluger settled in Rome and Wojtyla later became Pope John Paul II. The newly crowned pope granted his first papal audience to "Jurek" and his family, to the astonishment of assembled heads of state, cardinals and other dignitaries. Kluger became a confidant of John Paul II and a trusted emissary in the pope's efforts to heal Catholic-Jewish relations, highlighted by the historic establishment of Vatican ties to the state of Israel in 1994.

Conversations

This true story offers vivid testimony to the awesome and unpredictable power of the relations we nurture with colleagues, friends, neighbors, and others in our midst. It reminds us that we change hearts and minds one relationship at a time. In so doing, we have the power to change the world.

NOTES

1. The author uses the term "interreligious" interchangeably with the term "interfaith" for the purposes of this article. The latter word is sometimes used to denote dialogue, study, and engagement between adherents of the three Abrahamic faiths, while "interreligious" refers to a broader array of faith traditions

and some groups that do not self identify as faith groups per se.
2. Sifra on Leviticus 19:18.
3. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations (2002: Continuum), pp. 207–208.
4. “Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents,” www.adherents.com.
5. This net figure includes those who say they are Jews by religion and others who were raised Jewish or have a Jewish parent, and say they have no religion. If we include those who were raised Jewish or had at least one Jewish parent but now identity with another religion, and a “Jewish affinity” group of others who consider themselves Jewish, the percentage rises to 3.8 percent of the adult U.S. population.
6. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, God Beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities (2014: Pickwick Publications), pp. 37–40.
7. For a more comprehensive survey of Jerzy Kluger’s impact on Catholic-Jewish relations, see his obituary in The New York Times, January 7, 2012.