The Halakhic Obligation of Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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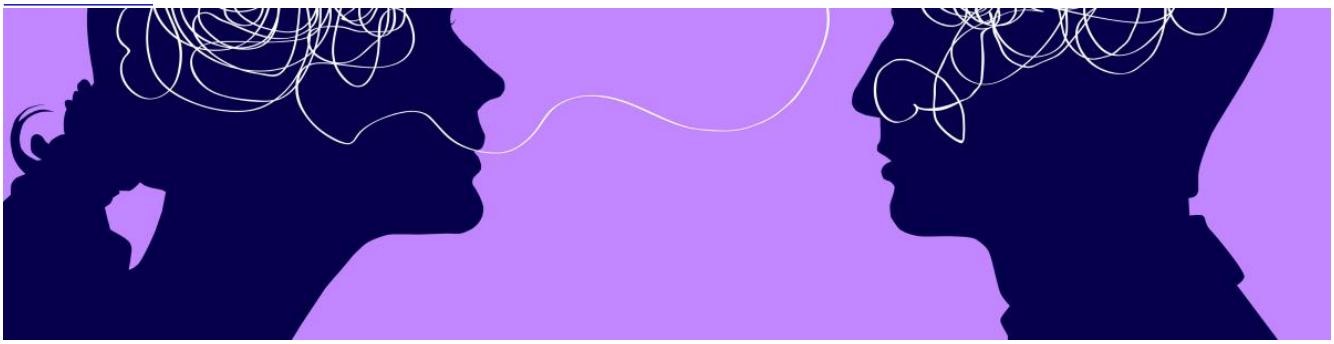

The late Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz served for many years as Rabbi of Congregation Agudath Sholom of Stamford, Connecticut. An active Orthodox participant in interfaith work, he was co-founder of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding at Sacred Heart University. This article appeared in issue 14 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideas.

She'elah: Is there a halakhic obligation of Western Orthodox Jewry to engage in Jewish-Christian dialogue with their fellow citizens?

Teshuvah: This question involves many components, but the short answer is yes. Western Orthodox Jewry is halakhically obligated to engage in dialogue with Western Christians. The necessity of our participation in dialogue with Christians is clear from any objective—even from a secular—perspective. The Western Jewish narrative demonstrates the utility of this dialogue. Our halakhic obligation to the Christians amongst whom we live includes social justice-related behavior that requires dialogue. Further, just as Christians approach their relationship with Jews as individuals who follow the will of God, Jews must approach this dialogue as fulfilling their halakhic obligation. As God's Providence shapes Jewish History, halakha guides Jewish actions in accordance with the will of God. The Jewish relationship with Christians in the West falls squarely under the rubric of building a better world in the service of God.

From talmudic times it was well established that none of the biblical or talmudic restrictions with regard to dealing with idolaters apply to Christians because Christians are monotheists who believe in the God of the Jewish people. Despite varying talmudic opinions, both pagans and Christians in talmudic days were already treated differently from heathens of previous times. For example, Jews

are obligated with respect to both pagans and Christians to visit their sick, bury their dead and help their poor (see Gittin 61a; also see Rambam Hilkhot Melakhim 10:12). It was also explicitly determined that outside of the land of Israel Gentiles are not considered idolaters (see R. Khiya bar Abba in the name of R. Johanan, Hullin 13b).

During the Middle Ages the halakha was established that Christians are not classified as idolaters. Rabbeinu Tam, for example, categorizes Christians as Noahides, not pagans. He accepts their oaths as being given in the name of God (Tosafot Behorot 2b). This is particularly noteworthy because of the period of Jewish history in which Rabbeinu Tam lived. In the twelfth century, he was caught in the anti-Jewish riots that accompanied the Second Crusade. He witnessed the utter destruction of the Jewish community of Blois, France, by a murderous mob. During the massacre, which occurred on Shavuot of 1147, Rabbeinu Tam's home was plundered, and he was severely wounded. He only narrowly escaped death. Still, he held that when Christians give an oath, they have the Creator in mind.

Rabbi Menahem Meiri, one of the sages of Provence who lived in the thirteenth and into the fourteenth century, further developed the halakha with regard to Jewish dealings with Christians. He states that Christians who live by the discipline of their religion should be treated as we treat our fellow Jews in our social and economic dealings (Bet haBehirah to A. Z. 20a).

Rabbi Joseph Caro, who lived through the expulsion from Spain as a child, accepts the view developed in the Middle Ages. In his Shulhan Arukh (Yoreh Deah 148.12; and more strongly by Mosheh Rifkes in the Beer haGolah to the Shulhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat, 425 at the end) he states that Christians are not considered idolaters.

Rambam goes further than just stating that Christians are not idolaters. Rambam adds an important element by stating that Christians assist in the preparation for the Messianic Era (Rambam L'am, Hilkhot Melakhim 11.4, the non-censored version). This was a particularly bold ruling by Rambam due to importance that both Christians and Jews place on the Messiah. However, Rambam does not otherwise view Christians favorably. He is not a Western Jew and his rulings on this topic reflect conditions of Jews in Muslim, not Christian, lands.

Just as Jewish law cannot be decided without a clear understanding of the current facts on the ground, the development of halakha over the centuries cannot be understood without an understanding of the historical narrative surrounding the legal rulings.

Between the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and the acceptance of Freedom of Religion enshrined in the American Constitution, there was a slow positive development in the relationship of Jews to their Christian fellow citizens in the West. Jews and Protestants were often grouped together as heretics and burned at the stake, side by side. The 1648 Treaty of Osnabruck, part of the Peace of Westphalia at the end of the Thirty Years' War, expanded religious tolerance by legalizing Jewish religious worship in “clandestine churches”—as long as that worship was discrete.

The first important halakhic development after this turning point was by Rabbi Jacob Emden. He attributes to Christians the possibility of greater participation in fulfilling the commandments of God than just following the seven commandments of Noah: by assisting the Jews in the fulfillment of mitzvoth.

He states that one who helps others to observe is greater than one who observes but does not help others to do so—even though he only observes the seven Noahide Commandments; and the non-Jew who does not observe the 613 commandments, but supports it, is considered among the blessed. R. Emden states that the founders of Christianity correctly demonstrated the Christian view that the Jews are still bound by God’s Torah—and that the children of Israel who remain loyal to God are worthy of Christian love (Seder Olam Rabbah veZuta).

This ruling is of particular importance within the Jewish historical narrative. In R. Emden’s lifetime Western Christendom opened to the possibility of not just tolerating Jews, but offering greater freedoms. The notion of a social contract between citizens and their government, which would include freedom to worship, was new in R. Emden’s time. This new conceptualization of the state would allow the Jewish people living in Western lands to openly serve God—and therefore better follow the tenets of Jewish Law.

R. Emden states, with reference to Christians, that Jews should consider them instruments for the fulfillment of the prophecy that the knowledge of God will one day spread throughout the earth. Whereas the nations before them worshipped idols, denied God's existence, and did not recognize God's power of retribution, the rise of Christianity served to spread among the nations the knowledge that there is One God who rules the world, who rewards and punishes and reveals Himself to humanity (Seder Olam Rabbah veZuta). This is perhaps not as strong as Rambam’s statement that Christians assist in the preparation for the Messianic Era, but it does offer the opportunity that Christians might participate more fully in service to God.

Although not a halakhic source, it is important to continue the Jewish narrative with Moses Mendelssohn. As part of the Haskalah, Mendelssohn confirmed this status of the non-Jew in relation to the Jew—but from a secular point of view (Jerusalem, section 4, Judaism and Christianity).

Mendelssohn contended that respect can only exist in a realm of secular modernity and tolerance based on universal truths. Mendelssohn played an important part in the Jewish narrative. In his lifetime, his views were accepted and implemented in the religious freedoms granted by the Virginia Declaration of Rights which accompanied its State Constitution. Soon thereafter, these religious freedoms and equal protection under the law were granted to all U.S. citizens with the ratification of the U.S. Bill of Rights. Then Napoleon similarly emancipated much of the Jews of Europe.

Moses Mendelssohn was an observant Jew who considered himself a disciple of Jacob Emden, and they had a friendly relationship. However, by disregarding the authority of halakha and secularizing the foundations of Jewish-Christian dialogue and cooperation, the shared project is weakened.

For R. Emden, respect is based on our shared commitment to God, divine commands, and divine providence (Seder Olam Rabbah veZuta). This, for R. Emden, is greater than being co-equal citizens of a secular state.

Perhaps Mendelssohn’s way was the only way, given the situation in his particular time. He did not develop halakha, yet we do not ignore him as part of the Jewish narrative, which, in its own way, impacts Jewish Law. [1] Just as the effect of the Providence of God on Jewish history is real, so too are the Torah's narrative and laws reflections of God's will. Only halakha is binding as precedent, yet we appreciate the role Mendelssohn played in Western Jewish emancipation and history. And as we do not ignore Mendelssohn, we cannot ignore what is going on around us today—in what will become part of Jewish history. The facts on the ground today are critical in determining the halakha with regard to Christian-Jewish dialogue.

When I came to Stamford in 1948 I involved myself in interfaith work, among other things. I felt a few areas were important to build my community: Youth work (including a basketball team in the Church league), hospital visits every day, and involvement in the interfaith religious community.

I joined the Stamford Clergy Association, which gave me close contact with the various church leaders in town, including Protestant, Black Baptist, and Methodist

ministers. I ultimately became the President of this association toward the end of the 1950s. Of the “out of towners,” that is, the Yeshiva University rabbinical graduates who received posts outside of New York City, many involved themselves in interfaith organizations in their local communities.

This fact was well known. We, as YU graduates, saw no halakhic barrier to prevent our involvements in such organizations. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik knew of our involvement and gave it tacit approval—mipenei darkei shalom: All the paths of Judaism lead to peace (Gittin 29b). We learned this from the Rav, and I took it to heart. I felt that visiting the sick and having a positive influence on the non-Jews in the community was important for me as a local congregational rabbi. It also had positive results for the Jews in my community.

By 1963 we had outgrown our synagogue building and purchased land to build a new one. One of my colleagues from the Black Baptist congregation expressed an interest in our current building. It was clear that we would receive the highest sale price from a buyer who would build a residential high-rise. But I felt that the non-monetary benefits of selling our building to the Baptist congregation would outweigh the monetary benefits of selling to a developer.

However, as there are halakhic ramifications to selling a synagogue, I felt that it was necessary to seek the advice and approval from the Rav. Rabbi Soloveitchik found no problem with the sale to the Church but said that with the sale of any synagogue building it must be shown that the new building is an improvement over the old. Implicit in the approval of the Rav is that the Christian group we were selling the synagogue to was not practicing idolatry (Avodah Zara, 2a). With the Rav’s approval, the sale of our synagogue building was made to our Baptist neighbors.

Soon after Rabbi Soloveitchik approved the sale of our synagogue to the Baptist congregation, he published the essay “Confrontation” (Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought, 1964 volume 6, #2), which addressed head-on the issue of Christian-Jewish dialogue. The Rav added important nuance to our evolving understanding of the halakha. (It is important to note that the “Confrontation” the Rav speaks of in this essay is not a confrontation between Jews and Christians. In fact, Jews and Christians are on the same side of the confrontation the Rav presents.)

Jews, the Rav says in “Confrontation,” stand shoulder to shoulder with Christians as part of Western Civilization. We Jews are halakhically obligated to advance the general welfare and progress of humankind, to alleviating human suffering, to

protecting human rights, to helping the needy, et cetera.

The Rav explicitly recognized that Western civilization has absorbed both Judaic and Christian elements—and that we may speak of a Judeo-Hellenistic-Christian tradition within the cultural framework of Western civilization. But the Rav clearly expresses that Jews are an independent Covenantal Community, and must remain so.

The Rav therefore requires one fundamental condition to Jewish-Christian dialogue to safeguard Jewish individuality and religious independence: No Jewish or Christian theological claims may be included in the dialogue. [2] To engage in interfaith theological dialogue would be counter to the reverence we are obligated to show to God. The Rav does not deny the right of the Christian community to address itself to the Jews in Christian eschatological terms.
The Rav's allowance of including eschatology within the scope of Christian-Jewish dialogue has echoes of Rambam's earlier ruling. And, like R. Emden, he offers the possibility for Christians to participate more fully in God's work.

Including the topic of eschatology in the dialogue suggests that the dialogue presents an opportunity to take part in building the World to Come or bring the Messianic Age—that is, to build a better world according to God's will.

A few months later that same year was the march on Washington in support of the Civil Rights Act, which would benefit both Jews and African Americans. I headed a delegation from Congregation Agudath Sholom to participate in what we knew would be an historic event.

At 3 a.m., the train to Washington D.C. stopped in Stamford. I boarded with many congregants—including young people. I marched in the front row with Martin Luther King, Jr., and then watched him as he delivered his "I have a Dream" speech. It was an important moment not only in Black and U.S. history, but also in Jewish history. The next year, when Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Jews were beneficiaries of newfound rights, along with African Americans.

A few years later, Dr. King was assassinated. Neighborhoods erupted with destructive anger in many cities across the United States. Immediately after the news broke, I was contacted by one of my African American colleagues from the Clergy Association. We organized a peaceful march through Stamford to convey a message of peace and unity. We marched down West Main Street in Stamford, singing songs of peace and ballads of the Civil Rights Movement. We were successful in Stamford. The atmosphere remained calm. As a comparison,

Newark, New Jersey, the city in which I grew up as the son of a congregational rabbi, suffered a great loss to people’s property and their livelihoods.

In the years that followed, I was invited to speak often, especially on Martin Luther King Day, at the Baptist congregation that resided in our former Synagogue building—with its big Star of David above the door.

The Rav is correct in his ruling that the scope of the dialogue should be limited; and we as Jews should always be vigilant that Christians with whom we dialogue have no hidden agenda to proselytize to us. However, my experiences have demonstrated that facts on the ground have improved in fundamental ways during my lifetime. Christians who are currently engaged in dialogue with Jews have sincere intentions and engage in the dialogue out of what they see as a shared commitment to follow the will of God.

The year after the Rav published “Confrontation,” the Catholic Church made a major theological change in their relation to the Jews in Vatican II, with their Nostra Aetate. The Catholic Church made clear that there is no ancestral or collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus. They made clear that the Jewish religion is not “extrinsic,” but “intrinsic” to the Catholic religion. And, although it claimed that the Church is the new people of God, it also insisted that Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God. In this declaration, the Church affirmed the continued validity of God's covenant with Israel. In the wake of Nostra Aetate Christian-Jewish dialogue flourished. In my dealings with Christians during this time I have found them to be sincere in their motives and beliefs.

In 1990, on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, I received a call from the chairman of the Rabbinical Council of America. He wanted to know if I would go to the Vatican that Sunday for the 25th anniversary of Nostra Aetate. One of the two Orthodox rabbis who were members of IJCIC (the International Jewish Committee for Inter-religious Consultations) had taken ill at the last minute and could not be part of a group that was headed to the Vatican. I was honored to accept this invitation.

Twenty Jews and twenty Catholics met in the Vatican. At the end of the conference, the Jews and the Catholics each wrote a paper and presented it to Pope John Paul II. The Pope read the papers and addressed us as a group. After the address, the Catholics were dismissed and the Pope told us that he wanted to meet each of us Jews personally. I situated myself at the end so my meeting wouldn’t be under time pressure.

When my turn came, I told the Pope we are Landsmen, explaining that Landsman is the Yiddish term for people from the same country or area. The Pope was from Poland where my parents had lived until they arrived in the United States just before my birth. I told him that my father had memories of the Polish people being anti-Semitic—yet it seems that the Jewish people have never had a greater friend in the leadership of the Church than this Polish-born Pope.

Pope John Paul II replied that he would explain with a story. He said that when he was young he attended a small school in Warsaw where he studied drama. He aspired to be an actor and a playwright. When the Nazis came, they gathered the entire student body into the courtyard. They brought down the faculty—many of whom were Jewish—and proceeded to kill them all in front him and the other students. This had a traumatic effect on him. He was not embarrassed to tell me that he was one of the best students in the school and he loved his teachers as they loved him. He said he walked away from that incident knowing that he did not want to live in such a world. He decided that he would enter a seminary and study for the priesthood. Soon thereafter he made a pledge to God. Pope John Paul II paused and said he had never told anyone before—but that he pledged to himself that whenever he is in a position of influence he would do what he can for the Jewish people. He never dreamed of being Pope—he was not yet even a priest—but now he is in exactly such a position of influence.
A bit overwhelmed, I must have shocked him as I breached protocol and leaned over and gave him a hug.

Three years later, as I was transitioning from rabbi of my congregation to rabbi emeritus, I co-founded and then became CEO of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield Connecticut—a Catholic institution. I subsequently met with Pope John Paul II seven more times. I found him to be completely sincere in his dealing with the Jews. I also had the opportunity to meet Pope Benedict XVI—several times before he was Pope and twice after. As Cardinal Ratzinger, he was a major theologian and influential confidant of Pope John Paul II before becoming Pope himself.

Although my experience with Catholics has been on a more intense level, I see a similar sincerity from many Protestant groups. I spent ten years teaching a Sunday adult education Torah class at local Protestant churches in New Canaan, from 1995 to 2005, and found them to be warm and sincere. Evangelical leaders I have dealt with, such as Marcus Braybrooke, have made great theological strides in aligning Jews and Christians in their relation to each other and, mutually, to God. The dual covenant theory has even become commonplace in Protestant

communities, allowing Jews to be seen as achieving salvation through Torah observance. The commitment extends to more practical realms, as several Protestant communities have recently become major financial contributors to Jewish organizations such as Keren Hayesod.

The Christian leaders who are our partners today have demonstrated that their main goal in dialogue is joint service to God. Building a better world is their focus. Christians involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue by definition have faith in God; it is only appropriate that the Jews involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue be similarly motivated by religious convictions. If Orthodox Jews do not participate in this dialogue, the Jewish side will continue to be represented by secular Jewish organizations whose world view does not match their religious Christian counterparts, and who fundamentally see their actions as universalist and not bound by God's will.

It is essential for Christian-Jewish dialogue to occur within the framework of Jewish law so it continues to be part of our halakhic understanding and our normative Jewish behavior. It is essentials because it is a part of both Jewish and Christian service to God. Christian-Jewish dialogue must not be left to Jews who do not feel bound by God's Law.

If Jews build this dialogue with Christians based on secular underpinnings our commitment is subject to change based on utilitarian or political calculations. But if both parties enter into dialogue as people who understand themselves to be in a covenant with God, we have a better chance of building a true and lasting relationship to alleviate suffering, advance social justice and build a brighter world in the service of God.

We, as Jews, do have certain halakhic obligations to the Christians among whom we live. These obligations can be thought of under the heading of social justice, including to bury their dead, to visit their sick, and to help their poor. Christians see the same obligation and are our partners in this, God's work. The necessary dialogue required for the fulfillment of these mitzvoth is likewise a halakhic requirement. All the more so, we must dialogue with our Christian neighbors to help establish the Messianic Era and create a better world to come.

Community leaders are obligated to ensure that there is proper inter-communal dialogue between Jews and Christians. It is clearly not incumbent upon—nor desirable for—every individual Jew to initiate such dialogue.

To conclude, most Jews currently engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue still believe that proper interfaith respect and dialogue can only exist in a realm of secular modernity and tolerance based on secular universalism. However, our partners, as faithful Christians, respect our shared commitment to God, God's Law, and God's Providence. We do a disservice to the Christian faith Community and to ourselves as Jews, by disregarding this fact.

Further, without the constraint of Jewish Law, any individuals or groups may feel free to dialogue and form alliances for whatever purposes. However, it is exactly God's Law that is important, and necessary, within Christian-Jewish dialogue.

It is time to re-contextualize our relationship with those Christians with whom we dialogue. It is time to accept that we and our Christian counterparts are engaged in God's work, mandated by halakha, to bring about a better world.

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[1] Please note that I leave Spinoza out of our narrative.

[2] However, even on this point, Dr. David Berger has stated in his article "Revisiting 'Confrontation' After Forty Years: A Response to Rabbi Eugene Korn" that a rabbi close to Rabbi Soloveitchik has stated that the Rav told him he trusted Rabbi Walter Wurzburger to deal with theological issues in conversations with Christians.