

# A JEWISH RESPONSE TO THE DECADE OF EVANGELISM

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**M**ISSONARY ENDEAVOUR IS ONE of the greatest obstacles to Christian–Jewish *rapprochement*. Jewish reaction to evangelism is influenced by historical, psychological and spiritual forces that retain their power even in times of profound secularization. Evangelists have argued for nearly two millennia from external and dogmatic sources; they tend to believe, even today, that the Old Testament clearly foreshadows the New and that only ignorance or recalcitrance can account for Jewish obduracy. In consequence they have not listened to the world that they have so passionately addressed and they have not understood that Judaism is a spiritual reality that is deeply influenced by the historical experience of its diverse faithful. Jews who have encountered them, particularly in the aftermath of the Holocaust, have heard only insensitivity and dogged incomprehension of a precious way of living faith.

Evangelists have rarely displayed interest in Jewish life: they have shown no awareness of the psychological traumas that are an inevitable consequence of leaving a faith community, and their preoccupation with texts has effectively precluded spiritual insight. Missionaries have not conversed or listened; they have argued and proclaimed in absolute and invincible certainty of the rightness of their cause, but they have rarely paused to wonder whether the language of their discourse is even intelligible for the Jewish listener.

Since the famous *Nostra aetate* declaration of 1965, the Catholic Church, and particularly the various specialist commissions charged with developing Catholic–Jewish relations, have addressed these problems in considerable depth. One passage, taken from the Vatican guidelines for implementing *Nostra aetate*, published in December 1974, is especially worthy of attention, and I would like to elaborate on its insight from a Jewish perspective. The passage argues in favour of the benefits of dialogue and mutual respect. It proceeds as follows:

In virtue of her divine mission, and her very nature, the Church must preach Jesus Christ to the world (*Ad gentes* 2). Lest the witness of

Catholics for Jesus Christ should give offence to Jews, they must take care to live and spread their Christian faith while maintaining the strictest respect for religious liberty in line with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*). They will likewise strive to understand the difficulties which arise for the Jewish soul – rightly imbued with an extremely high, pure notion of the Divine transcendence – when faced with the mystery of the incarnate Word.<sup>1</sup>

It is a most striking insight: we have taken leave of the realms of text and theology and discovered that religious perception is rooted in the affinity of the soul with the divine. Jewish spirituality is manifest in an innate longing for the transcendent God, and the Christian mystery of the incarnation is therefore beset with ‘difficulties’ for the Jewish people.

Dialogue can no longer be confined to verbal exchange and the document seeks to encourage ‘a common meeting in the presence of God, in prayer and silent meditation – a highly efficacious way of finding that humility, that openness of heart and mind, necessary prerequisites for a deep knowledge of oneself and of others’.

The insight offered by the 1974 guidelines is profound and correct, but it is not the whole truth. Judaism is indeed inspired by a pure notion of transcendence, but this coexists with an equally powerful sense of the intimacy of God with his people Israel, a sense that reflects a knowledge of the divine love.

Jewish liturgy offers an abundance of illustration. At the onset of night the evening service expresses awe in the presence of the Creator of light and darkness, the Lord of Hosts who causes the day to pass and bring on the night, ordering the stars in their heavenly constellations. As the worshipper gazes at the night sky, a second blessing elicits a different emotion:

With eternal love have you loved your people Israel. You have taught us Torah and commandments, laws and judgements. When we lie down and when we rise up, we will rejoice, O Lord our God, in the words of your Torah, for they are our life and the length of our days. May you never take away your love from us. Blessed are you, O Lord, who loves his people Israel.

For pre-modern people the night was often a perilous time and before our formal communal prayer there is a simple expression of faithfulness:

Blessed be the Lord by day.  
 Blessed be the Lord by night.  
 Blessed be the Lord when we lie down.

Blessed be the Lord when we rise up.  
For in thine hand are the souls of the living  
and the dead . . .  
Into thine hand I entrust my spirit:  
thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, God of truth.  
Our God who art in heaven,  
reveal unto us thy oneness . . .  
and reign over us forever.

On Sabbaths and festivals, the mood changes and we ask that the God who guards our going out and our coming in might spread the 'tabernacle of Thy peace over all thy people Israel, and over Jerusalem'.

These prayers are recited every evening by traditionally observant Jews. While texts have been amended with the passage of time, the substance and tonality has scarcely altered over a thousand years. The prayers are recited in Hebrew and worshippers know they are participant in an unbroken continuity that was the world of their fathers and mothers and of their parents before them. The liturgy is national, emphasizing the destiny of the people of Israel in the world and in the presence of God.

Today there are many of us who do not regularly recite the evening service, and the pressing concerns of daily life cause us to be more perfunctory than our forebears. Few of us experience the depth of prayer in every one of our daily services. Yet those who would speak to Jews about matters of faith must understand that the liturgy has shaped and formed our spiritual perception. The sense of God that it evokes, both intimate and exalted, is encountered by most Jews at some stage in life, even in our more secular times. 'Israel' and 'Jerusalem' will always resonate while the power of Kaddish – the memorial prayer – and the experience of the Day of Atonement do not pass easily away from those who have known them.

Beyond the Judaism of the liturgy lies the realm of a more intensely personal spirituality. I would like to offer two very different examples, one, the prayer of an anonymous Jewish woman in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe; the second was written by Rabbi Eliezer Azikri, a mystic who lived in sixteenth-century Safed, a town in Galilee.

The Jewish Sabbath begins about half an hour before sunset on Friday afternoon and lasts twenty-five hours, until the stars are visible in the night sky on Saturday evening. Before the onset of Sabbath, candles are lit in the home, usually by the woman of the house. Light is seen as a source of harmony and peace and the candles have acquired considerable symbolic significance. Candle-lighting is a time of personal prayer, as the passage illustrates:

O God of your people Israel,  
 You are holy  
 And you have made the Sabbath  
 and the people of Israel holy.  
 You have called upon us to honour  
 the sabbath with light,  
 with joy  
 and with peace.  
 As a king and queen give love to  
 one another,  
 As a bride and her bridegroom,  
 So have we kindled these two lights  
 For love of your daughter,  
 The Sabbath day.  
 Almighty God  
 Grant me and all my loved ones  
 A chance to truly rest on this  
 Sabbath day.  
 May the light of the candles drive  
 out from among us  
 The spirit of anger, the spirit of harm.  
 Send your blessings to my children,  
 That they may walk in the ways of  
 Your Torah, Your light.  
 May you ever be their God  
 And mine, O Lord,  
 My creator and my redeemer,  
 Amen.

The poem is inspired by a sense of intimacy and holiness; the prayer is offered in the home, as part of the life of a family; it is a moment that will be instantly recognizable for anyone who has had a Jewish upbringing; it summons memories of mothers and daughters and Friday nights when grandparents came to dinner and the *Jewish Chronicle* was much in evidence.

These experiences are not forgotten; they are an indelible fragment of personal memory and familial recollection. The prayer was not a ritual utterance: its pronounced feminine imagery implies the creative engagement of the woman who wrote it as an expression of her religious life, perhaps in response to the masculine orientation of traditional piety. Her children probably stood by her as she prayed quietly, and her spiritual life would become theirs as they grew older and acquired understanding and sympathy. Such is the way of religious nurture in traditional societies.

The Vatican statement that I quoted above might be taken as contrasting transcendence and incarnation. The former is certainly high and pure, but it is only the latter that brings God into the realm of humankind. God's immanence is bound up with the mystery of the incarnate word. For Rabbi Eliezer Azikri, awe and intimacy combine in the highest spirituality of mystical experience:

Soul's beloved, compassionate Father,  
Draw Your servant to Your will.

Let him run, swift as a deer,  
To kneel before Your majesty.  
Sweeter is Your love to him  
Than honey from the comb,  
Than any taste of pleasure.

Glorious, radiant, cosmic light,  
My soul is faint for love of You.  
Heal her, I pray, O God,  
Show to her Your splendid glow.  
Then will she be strengthened, cured,  
Your maidservant forever.

O Faithful, may Your tender mercies  
Reach Your son who loves You greatly.  
In deepest longings has he sought  
To gaze upon Your mighty splendour.  
My God, my heart's delight,  
Come quickly; be not hidden.

Reveal Yourself, my Dearest; spread over me  
The shelter of Your peace.  
Your presence lighting up the world,  
We shall rejoice, exult in You.  
Hurry, Beloved, time has come,  
Grant me Your grace  
As You did of old.

Eliezer Azikri found the healing of his soul in a transcendent glory that no earthly manifestation could equal or surpass. He knew the physical longing of unrequited love, but he would only find peace in the presence of the indescribable radiance that is the source of all souls. For the Jewish mystic, inner experience is derived from the breath of God, which was the essence of creation at the beginning of time. The soul is known sensibly, and is neither abstract nor a postulate of theology. The essence of all life is spiritual, and the soul longs for transcendent splendour as the deer runs to living water.

Very few of us are granted the experience of Eliezer Azikri, but his prayer is sung in many synagogues before the onset of the sabbath or at the third meal which is taken as the sabbath is departing, a time coincident with its greatest holiness. His words have a formative impact, even upon those who have not known his spiritual perception.

Judaism is profoundly troubled by the mystery of the incarnation. The perplexity is ultimately spiritual, but the concept is in striking contrast to the assumptions of Jewish religious life. Evangelists who believe that the central obstacle to their endeavour is textual or dogmatic have neither listened nor understood. The matter is of deeper significance. Furthermore, Judaism is the fabric of a communal life, indistinguishable from the most important personal relationships, which colour our memories and our psychological development. To reject the faith is not merely to exchange one set of beliefs for another; it is a most complex and perilous journey engaging every aspect of one's life and relationships and creating in the process conflict, tension and great pain.

The ultimate hope of Judaism is that life will be restored to the holiness of primeval creation; every sabbath is seen as an insight into this resanctified universe, a foretaste of the 'world to come'. The world will be guided by the Messiah, the anointed one of God, and traditional Jews await his coming at the beginning of the redemption which will be the end of days. If we return to our liturgy, we find several references to the Messiah, but even in the most traditional prayer books the Messianic role cannot be described as central. (Reform and Liberal Judaism no longer expect a Messianic figure at all: they emphasize an ultimate age when prophetic visions of peace, harmony and justice will be realized.) Redemption is indeed of focal importance, but emphasis is upon God as the ultimate redeemer.

A similar pattern is discernible in prayers recited on festivals that recall events when human intervention was clearly crucial in effecting deliverance. Moses merits a single, incidental, reference in the Passover narrative, the Haggada, that Jews recite together on the first two nights of that festival. The biblical narrative, of course, is radically different. The divine name does not occur in the biblical book of Esther, but prayers recited on the relevant Jewish festival abbreviate the narrative and focus upon divine providence.

The Jewish soul is imbued with a longing for both transcendence and the intimacy of the divine presence; in consequence there has been a tendency to diminish the redemptive role of major religious figures, even those of the greatest spiritual stature.

The pattern is also discernible in the Jewish conception of Atonement and the spirituality of the High Holy Days, the penitential period of the

religious calendar. The High Holy Days, referred to as the Days of Awe, are permeated by a sense of human inadequacy and divine judgement, and even the angels tremble before the Judge of all the earth when the great shofar (ram's horn) is sounded. The presence of the transcendent God is emphasized in the imagery of kingship, fusing distance with omnipotence, but there is, equally, a longing for that same transcendence, in the presence of which every creature is restored to the plenitude of its ultimate holiness, for it finds its source and its place in the presence of God its Creator.

Transcendence coexists with a sense of the divine compassion, even at a time of judgement and accentuated awareness of fragility and sinfulness. At a focal point in each service we stand together and sing very quietly: 'Our father, our king, be gracious to us and answer us. For we have no goodly deeds. Be with us in your charity and compassion and grant us your salvation.'

For Jewish tradition, man in his sin experiences both distance and intimacy. When Adam and Eve stand bereft in the garden, they are about to go into exile. Adam retains his sense of the wonder of life and names his wife Chava, for she is the mother of all the living. In a moment of extraordinary tenderness, God not only makes garments for Adam and Eve, but he also dresses them, as a mother dresses her children before they go out into the cold.

In the Book of Samuel (2 Sam 12:13) we encounter David after he has received a rebuke from Nathan the prophet. 'And David said unto Nathan: "I have sinned against the Lord"; and Nathan said unto David: "The Lord hath put away thy sin: thou shalt not die".' Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, one of the greatest Rabbinic sages, notes that in the Masoretic text there is a blank space after David's utterance. He was forgiven after his brief confession because God heard his silence and knew the depths of his broken-heartedness.

Between penitence and grace lies a cloud of unknowing. A contemporary Rabbinic authority, Rabbi J. B. Soloveichik, has evoked the essence of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in his poetic description of Moses standing on Mount Sinai after the disaster of the Golden Calf. Moses had been instructed that no man was to accompany him, nor was anyone to be seen on the mountainside. Sinai is silent and desolate and as Moses scans the rocks he finds nothing. He stands and shivers as the starlight fades at the break of a new day. God does not appear: he wants Moses to seek him in prayer and supplication. God is present in a cloud and is with him. A distant faint sound is heard as Moses trembles. It enunciates the qualities of God's compassion that define forever the

penitential liturgy of the Days of Awe. Before Moses hears he has to stand alone in the unbroken silence of a dark desert night. This is the age-old world of the Baal Teshuva, the man of penitence returning to his God.

It is possible to express this world in the abstract language of the theologian, but to do so is to lose sight of the depth and power of the encounter that is graven indelibly in the remembrance of all who have known the Days of Awe. *Homo religiosus* cannot shed his faith and embrace the world of another as a man changes his garments after the heat of the day has passed. His memories, his language, his deepest relationships and his childhood recollections are embedded in the landscape of traditional life: his spiritual longings are defined forever by the liturgy that gave them form in his earliest years. A Rabbinic gloss on the Joseph story has Joseph about to embrace the culture of Egypt: he draws back suddenly when he is overcome by a sudden recollection of the face of his father. When I study the photograph albums that are my family history, I see the faces of Eastern European Jewry, and I know their dignity, their scholarship and their suffering amidst the remorseless poverty of Polish village life. I am very different from them, but my spiritual life has been defined by their world, and the names of the Jewish towns of pre-Holocaust Europe wake memories and associations that are irrational and utterly unexpected.

Two years ago, I visited Germany for the first time, to attend a conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews. I expected that my journey would be uneventful; almost half a century had passed since European Jewry had been devastated by its greatest catastrophe, and the people I would meet were of a new generation, who had grown up in a post-war Europe. I had heard of the thousands of young Germans who made cultural pilgrimages to the sites of the concentration camps and I wished to be with them and to understand. I recalled speaking to a group of teenagers from the German School in London; they had an unusual maturity and were deeply concerned about neo-Nazi outrages and racist attacks in their homeland. They wanted to know what I felt and I gradually discovered that, like me, they were burdened by the past. They also felt unsettled by the events of their country's recent history.

The conference took place in a retreat on the edge of the Thuringian forestland in the former Eastern Germany, not too distant from Frankfurt. Frankfurt was a major centre of pre-war Jewish life and the home of what is now described as modern Orthodoxy. As we drove through its streets I could scarcely believe that Rabbi Hirsch's com-

munity was no longer and that his great synagogue would never again be thronged with worshippers. As we travelled into the country, road signs indicated that Fulda and Hildesheim were close by. One could almost hear Jewish boys and girls of sixty years ago going for Passover rambles, singing their songs and being young together.

I have a great affinity with the Hassidic practice of private prayer in a natural environment but here, in Thuringia, I prayed in a quiet corner of the residence or in my room in the evening. I did not walk in the gardens or the forestland as I usually would. The grounds were pleasant and peaceful, but I felt a sense of utter desolation.

The conference concluded with a reception and concert at the Wartburg, an eleventh-century fortress built on a commanding hilltop overlooking the forest. It is a massive structure that is illuminated at night when its grey stone is visible for miles around.

During the Nazi period the SS used the ancient fortress as an icon of the thousand-year Reich. The stronghold is the incarnate essence of absolute and naked power, infused with the romanticism of its magnificent forest setting. It is the living spirit of the explosive forces that erupted into modern civilization and swept aside its fragile rationality. The sounds of the 'Horst Wessel Song' and Nuremburg, the broken glass and the surging flames, are present and held there forever. How much I had read and how little I knew until I stood in this place.

Night was drawing in and I left the hall to say my afternoon prayers. I gazed at the early sunset and the darkening forest and recalled the dread of the psalmist when the face of God was hidden from him. I could not stand in prayer here; the words lost their meaning and were empty and void. I returned to the hall as the concert came to an end and the gathering applauded the musicians.

The past is a part of me and I had not known. Today, when Jewish men and women read of neo-Nazism, of Zhirinovskiy and of Fascist ministers in a major European democracy, when swastikas are once again daubed on our synagogues and our Moslem and Hindu friends suffer violation and abuse as they walk through our streets, we recall our families and our people only fifty years ago. When I visit my synagogue's religion school I sit with the children to help them with their Hebrew and listen to their teachers' stories. I feel the presence of hundreds of thousands of Jewish children who sat with their teachers in similar classrooms all over Europe, before their world was engulfed in darkness and despair.

Can it really be, after all of these things have come to pass, that Jewish faithfulness should disappear from the countries of Europe and the

holiness of our traditional life should be no more? Can anyone really desire that Jewish children will no longer learn Hebrew and take joy in the stories of our people? That Shabbat, Pesach and the Day of Atonement will cease to be the sacred times of the year, and the Torah will no longer be chanted in our synagogues?<sup>2</sup>

May the light of the candles drive  
out from among us  
The spirit of anger, the spirit of harm.  
Send your blessings to our children,  
That they may walk in the ways of  
Your Torah, Your light.  
May you ever be their God  
And mine, O Lord,  
My creator and my redeemer,  
Amen.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The text is cited in Fisher, E. J. and Klenicki, L. (eds), *In our time: the flowering of Jewish Catholic dialogue* (Paulist Press, 1990), p 32.

<sup>2</sup> I owe this thought to the late Abraham Joshua Heschel, a spiritual leader of American Jewry and a major participant in Christian-Jewish conversation.