

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Interfaith Dialogue as Mitzvah



Context

Interfaith initiatives - local and national, theological and practical – are a regular part of the life of many Reform synagogues, and our rabbis and members have led the way in crafting this aspect of Jewish communal life. Interfaith encounter is both an important part of building close local relationships, and an effective way of understanding our own Judaism more confidently - being able to discuss and understand difference deepens our understanding of our Judaism as well as of the other.

*In this article, **Rabbi Fred Morgan**, Movement Rabbi, Union for Progressive Judaism: Australia, New Zealand and Asia, explores interfaith dialogue as holy work, and thus a core part of Jewish life.*

Content

There is a long tradition of interfaith engagement in the Progressive Jewish world. An active and curious awareness of other faiths is intrinsic to the Enlightenment and the breaking down of the ghetto walls that separated Jews, psychologically as much as politically, from their host communities for several hundred years. A few Jewish scholars prior to modernity had spoken about the place of other religions in God's universe; but as the historian Jacob Katz has shown, their thinking was driven more by social and economic realities than by theological curiosity.ⁱ This continued into the 19th and 20th centuries. The multiplicity of faiths in the world was rarely viewed through a theological prism. The big questions about what it means for us Jews to exist in a universe of many faiths, what our unique purpose in the world might be and what God requires of us as Jews in the light of interfaith awareness, were not generally raised. Few Jewish thinkers considered the impact of what John Hick has called the 'Copernican revolution' in religion, when we stop seeing all faiths as revolving around our own. The dominant focus was still on Judaism as a discrete religious system and the Jewish way of life as existing independently of the historical events going on around us. Hence people in the Jewish community were shocked when 'Jewish Hindus' and 'Jewish Buddhists' began to appear in the 1950s and 60s.

Theological engagement with interfaith actually began not with the Eastern traditions but with Christianity and Islam. This is to be expected, as Jews had lived for far longer in creative tension with these religions than with the Dharmic faiths. Judaism shares a familial relationship with Christianity, though the exact nature of that relationship, whether parent-child or siblings, is heatedly debated, and it does make a difference theologically speaking.ⁱⁱ The awakening realisation among Christians that Jesus was a Jew and his milieu was that of the proto-rabbis gave Jewish scholars like Claude Montefiore, Samuel Sandmel, Leo Baeck, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Ignaz Maybaum the opening they needed to explore the theological relations between the two faiths.ⁱⁱⁱ Notably, in every formulation the Jewish faith came out on top, so to speak. Christianity is portrayed as derivative or more distant from the source, though it is acknowledged that it has played a crucially important role in disseminating Torah ethics to the Gentiles or nations of the world. This view, essentially derived from Maimonides, has dominated Jewish thinking about relations not only with Christianity but with Islam as well.^{iv}

The challenge in "seeking interfaith understanding" is to detach ourselves from reading other faith traditions only in terms of "what they mean for the Jews," that is, looking at them solely in terms of their impact on the Jewish people, and allowing them to speak in their own words about how they view the world and the meaning of human activity within it.^v In other words, it is to let Christianity, Islam and other faiths speak for themselves, as separate and independent religions. This is hard for Jews, given our negative social histories with some of these faiths and our ancient and instinctive judgment of idolatry on others such as Hinduism.^{vi}

Just as the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* (1965) famously called upon Catholics to listen to Jews speak about Judaism before arriving at conclusions about where Judaism stands,^{vii} so some contemporary Jewish theologians are requiring Jews to listen to the proponents of other religions before making judgments about what they are about. This is a massive step for Jews to take.

But why should we pay attention to other faiths? There is enough to learn about Judaism to occupy us for several lifetimes. My answer is bound up with my understanding of *mitzvah*, what God requires of us. It has taken many centuries, a tumultuous history, and the birth of democratic nations for us to be in the position in which we can begin to look outwards, beyond our own tradition to those of others who live in close proximity with us. Often our nearest neighbours are devout adherents of other faiths. This is the deeper meaning of the contemporary notion of multiculturalism. Whether we like it or not - and recent political events suggest that many do not - we live in a multicultural universe. Therefore, cultural diversity becomes the context for our religious life. In keeping with my Jewish understanding, I see this not as a matter of chance but as an expression of God's will for humanity. It offers us possibilities that people before us, even in the 20th century, could hardly imagine. It suggests that God's will for us as individuals is somehow synchronised with God's will for humanity as a whole.

This is where the concept of interfaith merges with the concept of *mitzvah*. I would argue it is an obligation today for Jews to learn about other faith traditions, to allow others to speak for themselves, to live with the contradictions and tensions that emerge, and ultimately to draw on what we learn to reflect upon our own religious culture and faith, in this way deepening our sense of what it means to us to be Jewish in the contemporary world. By calling this activity a *mitzvah*, I mean to say that it is no longer an option for me to choose to engage with the other in terms of their faith tradition; it is a necessity. It is not the case that my neighbour *happens to be* a Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Christian. I recognise that their religious identity is central to their existence. It is thus incumbent on me, if I truly wish to love or respect my neighbour, to take his or her religious faith seriously.

In the end, by doing this I demonstrate my belief in the notion that we are all created “in the image of the Divine (*b'tzelem Elohim*)”. This expression from Genesis 1 has become over the past few decades a catchphrase for Jewish theology in Reform Judaism.^{viii} It wasn't always so. That it has taken on this status in our time is a sign that interfaith engagement is indeed a *mitzvah* for us.

Contemplation

Torah reminds us that no one person can know all Truth. When, in Exodus 33, we read that “no-one can see God's face and live”, we learn that any claim to know the right way, or God's way, is misguided. Interfaith dialogue and encounter allows us to hear the truths of the other. But, in what feels like an increasingly polarised world, is it enough to meet with the other? How can we transform dialogue and understanding into wider actions that bring change and an acceptance of difference rather than fear of it?

ⁱ Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval & Modern Times*, Schocken 1962.

ⁱⁱ See Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: the Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, University of Pennsylvania 2004

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, ed., *Jewish Expressions on Jesus: an Anthology*, Ktav 1977; Ignaz Maybaum, *Triologue Between Jew, Christian and Muslim*, Littman Library 1973.

^{iv} See David Novak, “Maimonides' Treatment of Christianity and its Normative Implications” in Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn, eds, *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, Littman Library 2012.

^v Portrayed as “making theological space for the other” in Tony Bayfield and Marcus Braybrooke, eds, *Dialogue with a Difference: The Manor House Group Experience*, SCM 1992.

^{vi} See Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “Encountering Hinduism: Thinking Through *Avodah Zarah*”, in Goshen-Gottstein and Korn, eds, *Jewish Theology and World Religions*. Goshen-Gottstein summarises an influential article by Adin Steinsaltz, “Peace without Conciliation: The Irrelevance of ‘Toleration’ in Judaism”, published 2005.

^{vii} The roots of a new Christian attitude towards Jews are found in section 4 of *Nostra Aetate*, though its implications for theological dialogue are still emerging, for example, in the Vatican document “The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable”, which appeared in 2016.

^{viii} See the prominence of the phrase in the Central Conference of American Rabbis' “Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism”, adopted in Pittsburgh in 1999.