

# Jewish Identity and Jewish-Christian Dialogue

## A View from Argentina<sup>1</sup>

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*This article emphasizes the dramatic need for a deep and substantial dialogue between Christians and Jews in the present. Abraham Joshua Heschel's call, in his famous "No Religion is an Island," is presented as an actual message for today. It is shown that despite the clashes between Jews and Christians since the very beginning of Christianity, generations of great Jewish scholars have stressed the importance of the interfaith dialogue for the construction of a better humanity. A review of the very important development of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue since Nostra Aetate in Argentina is also presented.*

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When he was a visiting professor of the Harry Emerson Fosdick Chair at the Union Theological Seminary of New York, Rabbi Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel titled his inaugural lecture: "No Religion is an Island."<sup>2</sup> He brilliantly developed the thesis that the interaction of dialogue between Jews and Christians is dramatically necessary in order to develop a spirituality capable of removing any vestige of "paganism," that enthrones idols, or idolizes concepts, as evil as Nazism and other despotic regimes that caused such havoc during the twentieth century. Heschel affirms:

Nazism in its very roots was a rebellion against the Bible, against the God of Abraham. Realizing that it was Christianity that implanted the attachment to the God of Abraham and involvement with the Hebrew Bible in the hearts of Western man, Nazism resolved that it must both exterminate the Jews and eliminate Christianity, and bring about instead a revival of Teutonic paganism.

Nazism has suffered a defeat, but the process of eliminating the Bible from the consciousness of the Western world goes on. It is on the issue of saving the radiance of the Hebrew Bible in the minds of man that Jews and Christians are called upon to work together. *None of us can do it alone.* Both of us must realize that in our age anti-Semitism is anti-Christianity and that anti-Christianity is anti-Semitism.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 21 (1966): 117–34. Reprinted in, id., *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), pp. 235–50 (quotations are from this volume).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

Heschel then analyzes the reality of the 1960s and claims, “Parochialism has become untenable.”<sup>4</sup> The influence we have on one another, that was always important in the past, has become absolutely necessary in the present. Heschel explains:

We fail to realize that while different exponents of faith in the world of religion continue to be wary of the ecumenical movement, there is another ecumenical movement, world-wide in extent and influence: nihilism. We must choose between interfaith and internihilism.<sup>5</sup>

The central point of Heschel’s thesis affirms that Nazism, one of the most abominable stains of the past century that caused a lasting and shameful stigma on humanity, tried to extricate the Bible and its message from the heart of humanity. As a victim of Nazism, he sees his Christian brothers and sisters as authentic partners in the restoration of the Bible and its message. This is crucial in the midst of a society that, instead of trying to reinstall the old Teutonic deities as Nazism tried to do—and that would distort the Darwinian concept of “natural selection” and discard the biblical paradigm of justice and benevolence—is now turning towards a nihilism in which existence seems to be a mere whim of “Mother Nature.”

For Heschel, Jewish-Christian dialogue contributes greatly to a meaningful presence of the Bible in the world and its universal vision for all of humanity. Heschel bases his opinion on certain classics of the great masters of the past. One of them is Maimonides’

4. Ibid., p. 237.

5. Ibid.

*Mishneh Torah* and appears only in the uncensored editions of this work:

Ultimately, all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite [Mohammed] who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for Mashiach’s [the Messiah’s] coming and the improvement of the entire world, motivating the nations to serve God together as Tzephaniah 3:9 states: “I will transform the peoples to a purer language that they all will call upon the name of God and serve Him with one purpose [Lit.: shoulder to shoulder].”<sup>6</sup>

An even more radical position regarding Christians and Islamic believers is found in the writings of Rabbi Menaḥem HaMeiri.<sup>7</sup> Also, Rabbi Jacob Emden develops similar concepts in his commentaries on *Pirkei Avot* that Heschel quotes in his lecture:

... the community of nations at present goes ahead launching the idea of God all over the world, among its peoples. On the frontiers, they name Him to point out that there is a ruler in the heavens and on the earth, who governs and supervises, rewards and punishes ... and through them these precious concepts that surely represent the divine will, were revealed in the far-away islands and the ends of the earth.

6. Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4. Translation by Eliyahu Touger, available at [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1188356/-jewish/Chapter-11.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1188356/-jewish/Chapter-11.htm).

7. See Jacob Katz, *Between Jews and Gentiles* (Bialik Institute: Jerusalem 1960), pp. 116–28 (in Hebrew). See also, id., *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961; New York: Schocken, 1962).

For this reason their community has remained until the present, because they honored their Lord, the God of Truth and His Torah, and they manifested His honor among the peoples who did not know Him and learned about Him. **This is why their community endures. . . . Since their intention is for the sake of heaven, reward will not be withheld from them,** because the merciful wants a (good) heart . . . also from them a great favor came to the remnant of the house of Israel who are present, because if it had not been for them, their work would have ended up wrong, we would have lost our hope among the peoples who hated Israel because of religious fervor. It was the Lord who was with us and who raised up Christian and Islamic wise men who defended us in each generation, so as to share the divine and only Torah with which they built their churches [and mosques] . . . and especially the wise Christians who always searched for the truth, have found that we are not guilty because we strengthened in our task to maintain the Torah of our God that is in our hands; for as much as they guarded, they will be recognized and it will be credited to them as an act of goodness and justice [*tzedakah*].”<sup>8</sup>

The famous prophecies of Isaiah (2:2–4) and Micah (4:1–5) present the idea that God will reveal himself to human beings who are aware of a transcendent God, who care about what human beings do and who act with justice and mercy. Zechariah also predicted that in the future the Lord will be one for all peoples and his name will be one (14:9). Zephaniah prophesied about a time

8. Jacob Emden (1698–1776), Commentary on *Pirkei Avot* 4:14 in *Lehem Shamayim* (4 vols; Jerusalem : Kolel u-Mekhon Pene Shabat, 1977/78). Only the part in bold is quoted in Heschel’s article; the rest is translated by the author.

in which all will serve God, shoulder to shoulder (3:9). In Biblical thought, there is a clear idea that the union of many peoples who pay homage to the God of the Bible will be an element of redemption. It can also be argued that the spread of early Christianity among “pagan” peoples had its foundations in the above mentioned prophetic sources.

Both Judaism and Christianity came to life within the Jewish people and so there is a close bond between them. They both knew that they share common origins and essence. But at the same time, certain things distinguished them from one another. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, while Judaism became a religion that defined a people dispersed throughout the world, without a sovereign central authority to bring them together and lead them politically and structurally as an institution. While Christianity was a religion of many peoples and nations, Judaism historically blended in itself three concepts: people, nation, and religion. For Christianity, the evangelization of many peoples was one of its main goals, a goal that it reached even at the cost of certain changes that in some aspects took it away from its original vision. History does not report any significant cooperation between the two religions in a joint effort to search for the redemption of the world. Even though there has always been fruitful dialogue between Jewish and Christian scholars, confrontations at the level of ordinary people generated a tragic drama that Edward H. Flannery<sup>9</sup> and Malcom Hay,<sup>10</sup> among others, have described in exceptional ways.

9. Edward H. Flannery: *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Macmillan, 1965); rev. ed. with a preface by Philip A. Cunningham (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2004).

10. Malcom Hay, *The Roots of Christian Anti-Semitism* (New York: Freedom Library Press, 1981).

After the *Shoah*, there was a movement among some Catholic thinkers who reacted to the horror of what happened to the Jewish people at the hands of Nazism and the part that the Catholic Church played in that tragedy. While it was the apologies of John Paul II that eloquently expressed criticism of the mistakes of the past, the person who really began this process was John XXIII. His openness to dialogue with the Jewish people caused controversy among the Jews. The article “Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel on Jewish-Christian Relations” is a very good description of one of the most significant confrontations that stemmed from the openness proposed by John XXIII.<sup>11</sup>

During the twentieth century, many Jewish scholars felt the need to discover the historical image of their ancestor, Jesus. Joseph Klausner<sup>12</sup> and David Flusser<sup>13</sup> stand out, among many others. Concerning the controversy caused by these publications among the Jewish people, Magen Broshi offers interesting insights in his article “Who heard about Christianity without Jesus?”<sup>14</sup> We also find the surprising phenomenon of Jewish intellectuals who, after having suffered the horror of the *Shoah*, searched the texts further to recompose the historic figure and the spiritual message of Jesus with the purpose of creating an intellectual basis on which to build

a new Jewish-Christian dialogue. Among them, Paul Winter<sup>15</sup> and Jules Isaac<sup>16</sup> are the most important.

Meanwhile in the collective conscience of the Jewish people, the wounds of past persecutions remained, together with concern raised by the controversy about Pius XII during those dark days of the massacre, even though there was the memory of those *Hasidei Ummot Ha'olam* (“the righteous among the nations”) who risked their lives to be living examples of Jesus’ message. It was John Paul II’s actions that marked a significant turning point in the sentiments of the Jewish people. They, and the State of Israel, felt that he began a new era in Jewish-Christian dialogue with his declarations, his visit to the synagogue in Rome, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, and with his actual visit to Israel.

While this may be true, it was actually some decades earlier, after *Nostra Aetate*, that Jewish-Catholic dialogue groups began to form in the world. This was very significantly true in Buenos Aires. Rabbi Marshall Meyer of blessed memory and Cardinal Jorge Mejía deserve special recognition as pioneers in bringing a new attitude and commitment to dialogue in Argentina. Numerous books were written here in Argentina on the dialogue between Catholic and Jewish leaders.<sup>17</sup> The Latin American Jewish Congress, B’nai

11. Reuven Kimelman, *The Edah Journal* 4 (2004). Available at [http://www.edah.org/backend/journalarticle/4\\_2\\_kimelman.pdf](http://www.edah.org/backend/journalarticle/4_2_kimelman.pdf).

12. Joseph Klausner, *Yeshu HaNotzri: Zemano, Hayiaiv ve-Torato* (Jerusalem: Stibl, 1922; Tel Aviv: Massadah, 1954). English transl. by H. Danby, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching* (New York: Macmillan, 1925; New York: Bloch, 1989).

13. David Flusser, *Jesus in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968). The most recent English edition is David Flusser and R. Steven Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

14. “*Mi sham 'a' al Natzrut beli Yeshu,*” *Ha-Aretz*, 07-05-07 (in Hebrew).

15. Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974).

16. Jules Isaac, *Jésus et Israël* (Paris: Michel, 1948; 2nd ed., Paris: Fasquelle, 1959).

17. Msgr. Justo Laguna and Rabbi Mario Rojzman, *Todos los caminos conducen a Jerusalem . . . y también a Roma* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1998); Guillermo Marcó, Daniel Goldman, and Omar Abboud, *Todos bajo el mismo cielo* (Buenos Aires: EDHASA, 2005); Rafael Velasco S.J. and Marcelo Polakoff, *En el nombre del padre y del rabino: Dilemas desde ambos bandos* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2010); Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio and Rabbi Abraham Skorka, *Sobre el cielo y la tierra* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 2010).

B'rith and the Jewish-Christian Confraternity, together with the Focolare Movement and the Community of Saint'Egidio, have all been very committed to this work. The same is true for the major institutions of the Jewish Community: Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA: "Mutual Jewish Argentinean Association"), and Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (DAIA: "Delegation of Jewish-Argentinean Associations"), as well as the principal institutions of the Catholic Church (the Dioceses, the Catholic University, etc.) that have developed a growing politics of dialogue with many significant congresses that were adequately covered by the media.

The Argentinean society, like a great part of humanity, is immersed in a dramatic search for its identity in the midst of a reality that is changing at an accelerated pace, a reality in which the very meaning of life and of the values that should guide the individual are in fact questioned. Paganism, in a different form from what we knew in the past, is still antagonistic to the biblical view of existence. It overpowers humanity and therefore our environments. Jews and Christians must work together, "shoulder to shoulder," in an effort to bring back to humanity a certainty about the meaning and value of life and existence. It is not a case of finding followers for a common cause, nor of reaching for positions of leadership, nor of taking to the pulpit to indoctrinate possible faithful. All these erroneous and false ambitions contributed to the failure of religions to provide values and a sense of ultimate purpose to humankind in the twentieth century. They, in turn, allowed the establishment of new "deities" whose "priests" followed those same miserable resolutions that we just listed. What we need to do is to launch an "ideal" that each person will adopt in his or her way, but

that will have as a common denominator the essence of justice and goodness that the Bible proposes.

For quite awhile now, Jewish-Christian dialogue in Argentina has moved away from just being friends or knowing one another to living together a real commitment. All those who accepted this commitment now have as an increasing challenge to continue opening the way that leads to a new reality. Meanwhile, ideological polarization that began in the early 1970s has also affected the religious environment, making it extremely difficult to reach our desired goals.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, there are those that today hold as their only creed the power to subjugate others and to accumulate wealth. On the other hand, there are those who, under the pretext of religion, proclaim slogans that have more to do with low human passions than with the love of God. These are the loathsome forms of paganism in the present that prevent us from seeing that one can find in the simplicity of the most humble person of faith, the most sublime sanctity. As Maimonides said:

... any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before God to serve Him and minister to Him and to know God, proceeding justly as God made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings that people seek, he is sanctified as holy of holies. God will be His portion and heritage forever. . . ."<sup>19</sup>

18. See Gilles Kepel, *La revanche de dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991).

19. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Shemitah VeYovel* 13:13. Translation taken from: [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1007178/jewish/Chapter-13.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1007178/jewish/Chapter-13.htm).

In his well-known monograph, *For the Sake Of HEAVEN and EARTH*,<sup>20</sup> Irving Greenberg proceeds from the same point of view as Heschel, namely, the particular relationship between Christianity and Judaism in history that must be seen in the light of the *Shoah* and the dramatic events of the post-modern world. In fact, the world is seeking a committed dialogue among religions that will give a meaningful contribution, and help us reach a common vision that acknowledges the dignity of each human person, who is respected simply because of being human. One of the most expressive and exemplary lessons of this commitment to our common humanity that must come about from interreligious dialogue was given by Heschel through the text of a telegram that he sent to President John Fitzgerald Kennedy on June 16, 1963:

I LOOK FORWARD TO PRIVILEGE OF BEING  
PRESENT AT MEETING TOMORROW AT  
4 P. M. LIKELIHOOD EXISTS THAT NEGRO  
PROBLEM WILL BE LIKE THE WEATHER.  
EVERYBODY TALKS ABOUT IT BUT  
NOBODY DOES ANYTHING ABOUT IT.  
PLEASE DEMAND OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS  
PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT NOT JUST SOLEMN  
DECLARATION. WE FORFEIT THE RIGHT TO  
WORSHIP GOD AS LONG AS WE CONTINUE TO  
HUMILIATE NEGROES. CHURCH SYNAGOGUES  
HAVE FAILED. THEY MUST REPENT. ASK OF  
RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO CALL FOR NATIONAL

REPENTANCE AND PERSONAL SACRIFICE . . .  
I PROPOSE THAT YOU MR. PRESIDENT  
DECLARE STATE OF MORAL EMERGENCY.  
A MARSHALL PLAN FOR AID TO NEGROES IS  
BECOMING A NECESSITY. THE HOUR CALLS  
FOR HIGH MORAL GRANDEUR AND SPIRITUAL  
AUDACITY.<sup>21</sup>

History is witness to the involvement of many Jews in many struggles for the dignity of the individual person. Among the victims of the repression in Argentina, the percentage of Jews among the *desaparecidos* (those who disappeared) was 10 times greater than that of the general population. The ideal of commitment, generosity, and dedication to the fight for the dignity of the human person is engraved in the collective thinking and acting of Jewish people. The challenge for religious leaders is to shape a framework of dialogue with other faiths, with whom we share universal visions and common values, in order to face the oldest of all challenges since their creation: to fully reveal themselves before God so that He may reveal Himself fully to humankind.

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20. *For the Sake of HEAVEN and EARTH: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2004).

21. Text taken from Abraham J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed., Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. vii.

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