

14. *Dabru Emet*

Dabru Emet, New York Times, September 10, 2000

In recent years, there has been a dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish and Christian relations. Throughout the nearly two millennia of Jewish exile, Christians have tended to characterize Judaism as a failed religion or, at best, a religion that prepared the way for, and is completed in, Christianity. In the decades since the Holocaust, however, Christianity has changed dramatically. An increasing number of official Church bodies, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have made public statements of their remorse about Christian mistreatment of Jews and Judaism. These statements have declared, furthermore, that Christian teaching and preaching can and must be reformed so that they acknowledge God's enduring covenant with the Jewish people and celebrate the contribution of Judaism to world civilization and to Christian faith itself.

Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel

The most important event for Jews since the Holocaust has been the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the Promised Land. As members of a biblically based religion, Christians appreciate that Israel was promised-and given-to Jews as the physical center of the covenant between them and God. Many Christians support the State of Israel for reasons far more profound than mere politics. As Jews, we applaud this support. We also recognize that Jewish tradition mandates justice for all non-Jews who reside in a Jewish state.

COMMENTARY BY MARCIE LENK

In the mid-1960s three of the most influential rabbis in the United States published public statements indicating what each felt to be the proper attitude of Jews with regards to Christians and Christianity. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik delivered a paper entitled "Confrontation" at a 1964 conference of the Rabbinical Council of America.¹ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel published an article entitled "No

¹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 6, no. 2 (1964): S-29.

Religion is an Island" in 1966.² Rabbi Moshe Feinstein wrote two responsa in 1967 including "Concerning the Prohibition Against Attendance at a Meeting with Christians on Matters of Rapprochement in Faith and Association with Them." Soloveitchik acknowledged that Jews and Christians must encounter each other in day-to-day life, "In the secular sphere, we may discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved and plans to be formulated."³ Discussions of theology, however, were off-limits. Heschel insisted that Jews and Christians need to work together as people of faith and as human beings in our shared universe, "The religions of the world are no more self-sufficient, no more independent, no more isolated than individuals or nations."⁴ Feinstein rejected both of these approaches, considering any Jewish dialogue with Christians fraught with the danger of evangelism. In the words of Rav Moshe, "a plague has now broken out in many locales on account of the initiative of the new pope, whose only intent is to cause all the Jews to abandon their pure and holy faith so that they will accept Christianity."⁵

Feinstein's reference to the "initiative of the new pope" was an acknowledgement of *Nostra Aetate*, a ground-breaking and theology-shaking statement about Judaism which emerged from the Second Vatican Council and famously proclaimed that "what happened in [Jesus's] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today" and warned against "hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone."⁶ The biggest and most authoritative church body in the world was beginning a process of

2 Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 21, no. 2 (1966), 117-134.

3 Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," 24.

4 Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," 119.

5 *Iggerot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* 3:43, translated by David Ellenson in his "A Jewish Legal Authority Addresses Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Two Responsa of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein," *The American Jewish Archives Journal* 52, nos. 1-2 (2000): 113-128.

6 *Nostra Aetate* is the "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," which emerged as part of the move of the Catholic Church towards *aggiornamento* [bringing things up to date]. The brief 1965 declaration was followed by Catholic and Catholic-Jewish committees which considered the issues raised by *Nostra Aetate* and have published many statements in its spirit since on a variety of theological and spiritual issues up until the present. These decades also saw statements by the Lutheran World Federation (1964, 1982), the United Methodist Church (1972), the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Church of Christ, the Mennonite European Regional conference (1977), the Synod of the Protestant Church of the Rhineland (1980)—all decrying anti-Semitism and calling for a constructive engagement with Jews and Judaism. All of these statements (and more) can be found on the denominational websites. They have also been gathered together in the *Dialogika* project of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations: <http://www.cccjr.us/dialogika-resources>.

acknowledging the wrongs in creed and in deed of the Church towards the Jewish people. What was to be the Jewish response? Would Jews trust that this was a real change in Church attitude? Would Jews really be accepted and respected as Jews by Christians? Should Jews pay any attention at all to internal Christian statements?

In addition to the three rabbis cited above, a number of individual Jewish leaders and scholars Eugene Borowitz, Irving Greenberg, and Jacob Neusner among others—did respond to *Nostra Aetate* in the years after its publication, but their writings, as well as the 1965 Catholic statement, others from the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Churches, as well as from interfaith organizations, remained (and remain) little known among Jews. *Dabru Emet* was the first American Jewish communal response to *Nostra Aetate* and the change of attitude towards Judaism from most Christian denominations. *Dabru Emet* appeared as a two-page spread in the *New York Times* on September 10, 2000. By then most Christian denominations had issued statements, changed liturgy, and added courses on the Shoah and Judaism in their schools and seminaries. Respecting and taking seriously this work of Christians—the writers and signers of *Dabru Emet* were ready to publicly challenge the common assumption that Jews either had little to learn from Christians or that engagement with Christians and Christianity remains a danger to Jews. As Christians have reassessed their ideas and theology about Jews and Judaism, there was a sense among these scholars that the time had come for Jews to reassess their ideas and theology about Christians and Christianity. According to one author, "Dabru Emet is not a definitive statement. It is the beginning of a discussion first among Jews themselves."⁷

Dabru Emet was developed from eight years of discussions of "The Jewish Scholars Group on Christianity," originally sponsored by the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore, and authored by Tikva Frymer-Kensky; Peter Ochs, David Novak, and Michael A. Signer. The signatories were rabbis (mostly liberal) and academics. The statement did not emerge from the organized Jewish community—official organizations (AJC, ADL, or Jewish Federation)—or denominational organizations. *Dabru Emet* appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Baltimore Sun*, where it was widely seen, in coordination with the publication of a companion volume, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*.⁸

7 Michael A. Signer, "Dabru Emet: A Contextual Analysis," *Theologiques* 11, nos. 1-2 (2003): 187-202.

8 Tikva Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, Michael A. Signer (eds.), *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

The appearance of *Dabru Emet* elicited much support/ but also strong critique. The official Orthodox response, authored by Dr. David Berger, declared that the call to reconsider Jewish theology was "fraught with danger/" insisting that Christianity is *avodah zarah* (idolatry) and summarizing *Dabru Emet* as "relativistic."¹⁰ A. James Rudin of the AJC argued that *Dabru Emet* was too uncritical of Christian responsibilities for Nazi anti-Semitism.¹¹ The strongest and most specific critique came in a series of articles by Jon D. Levenson who argued that imprecision in many statements in *Dabru Emet* led to falsehoods.¹² Levenson felt that the statement ignored or obscured differences between Christianity and Judaism which remain important to both Christians and Jews. He declared that *Dabru Emet* showed "the disturbing tendency to hide from inconvenient differences." Authors and supporters of *Dabru Emet* published responses, acknowledging that any short statement about something so complex will obscure and lack depth and pointing to the companion volume, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, to further explore the issues raised in the statement.

Since *Dabru Emet*, many Jewish academics and spiritual leaders have embraced changes in Jewish-Christian relations and are considering the implications of these changes for intergroup cooperation and for Jewish self-understanding. If *Dabru Emet* oversimplified or obfuscated, it did succeed in challenging Jews to consider the meanings for Jews of Christian changes in theology and attitude about Judaism. Since the initial responses, many more articles and books on related themes have been published, as well as a commentary on the New Testament, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, written entirely by Jewish scholars. Recent decades have seen growth in Jewish Studies courses in universities, including in Christian universities and departments of theology. Jewish, Christian, and interfaith organizations have published more developed statements, and the half-century anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* even

9 David Rosen, "'Dabru Emet': Its Significance for the Jewish-Christian Dialogue," Dutch Council of Christians and Jews (OJEC) at Tilburg, The Netherlands, November 6, 2001.

10 David Berger, "Statement by Dr. David Berger regarding the New York Times ad by Dabru Emet," September 14, 2000, accessed July 9, 2019, https://advocacy.ou.org/statement_by_dr_david_berger_regarding_the_new_york_times_ad_by_dabru_emet/.

11 A. James Rudin, "Dabru Emet: A Jewish Dissent," accessed July 9, 2019, <http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru+Emet%27%3A+A+Jewish+Dissent.2349.0.html?L=3>.

12 Jon D. Levenson, "How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Commentary* 112, no. 5 (December 2001): 31-37, with a reply to correspondents in "Controversy: Jewish-Christian Dialogue, Jon D. Levenson & Critics," *Commentary* 113, no. 4 (April 2002): 17-21; Jon D. Levenson, "The Agenda of Dabru Emet," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 7 (2004): 1-26.

brought two statements by Orthodox rabbis showing willingness and desire to consider Christianity as an expression of God's will.¹³

Public statements like *Dabru Emet* have provoked study, conversation, and a deeper understanding of the other. Still, challenges remain:

- Most statements, including *Dabru Emet*, are composed and consumed by professional interfaith representatives. How much trickles down to the average Jew?
- Jewish institutions use their limited time to educate Jews about Judaism, leaving very little time to try to understand Christianity on its own terms.
- How do new Jewish-Christian alliances affect views of other groups? For example, are Jews and Christians working for or against improved relations with Muslims?
- The State of Israel is often the elephant in the room, the topic off-limits in interfaith dialogue. Still, Jewish-Christian relations are sometimes judged by Jews on how much support is expressed for Israel. Some Christians who have moved the furthest from anti-Semitism and replacement theology are the ones who are critical of Israel, and others who are devoted supporters of Israel maintain traditional replacement theology.

Dabru Emet called for Jews to respond to changes in Christianity. It remains for religious leaders and scholars to think about assumptions, traditions, and actions, challenging us to live deeply within our own communities while considering God's plan not only for ourselves, but also for the rest of humanity.

13 "Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of Nostra Aetate," Statement of the Conference of European Rabbis, The Rabbinical Council of America, and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (Aug. 1, 2017).