

# NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES

## Annual Report – 2017-2018

Rabbi Harold J. Berman

I am pleased to be able to report to our constituent organizations and supporters that the 2017-2018 has been a very productive year for the National Council of Synagogues, with a number of opportunities for our clergy and lay representatives to share current issues and learn more about each other through scholarly discussion.

### Meetings and Conferences

#### The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

**November 9, 2017**

Our fall meeting was held in New York at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the founding congregation of Reconstructionist Judaism. National Council of Synagogues representatives led by **Rabbi David Straus** met with delegates of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, chaired by **His Eminence Cardinal Timothy Dolan**. The meeting, coordinated by myself and **Rev. Dennis McManus**, focused on issues concerning the environment with two stimulating presentations by leading scholars.

**Professor Kenneth Irwin**, former Dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America shared copies of his book, *A Commentary on Laudato Si*, and distributed copies of the Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis, *On Care for our Common Home (Laudato Si.)* Msgr. Irwin noted that in their leadership of the church, different popes have focused on issues what reflected their own expertise and experience, and Pope Francis, as a trained scientist, has a special interest in environmental issues.

Laudato Si emphasizes the needs of people as individuals in the modern world, challenging an unregulated capitalism that creates a “throw-away” culture. One third of all food in the world today is wasted, and one fifth of all children in the world go hungry. Also, people migrating because of their need for a new home face dangers that are life threatening as they try to make their way to safety. There is a need for action, not just words. And there is a need for prayer that will impel people toward action. The Pope has also called for a Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region, which will take place in Rome in October of 2019.

**Rabbi Arthur Green**, Professor and Dean Emeritus at Hebrew College in Boston, presented a paper, “Religion and Environmental Responsibility: A Jewish Catholic Conversation,” which is available on the website of the National Council of Synagogues, as is his liturgical program, “Ma’amadot.”

Rabbi Green spoke of environmental concerns as issues in humanity’s need to seek salvation. He suggested the irony that the one species capable of destroying the planet Earth is the one that has the moral faculty to realize its obligation not to. He noted that the Pope issued his call to all religions and that all need to find a process of rebuilding and healing the world through our religious commitments. As we all share language that speaks of the creation of the world by God, we need to place the protection of that Creation in the center of our prayers and our observances. He offered the ancient practice of Ma’amadot to add devotions to our daily prayers.

Rabbi Green emphasized that we all need to work together, we need to unambiguously embrace the teachings and warnings of science, we need to see the equality of all people, all races, male and female, and we need to see our spirituality not in rejecting the physical world but in protecting it. We need to see the holiness of the world around us and change our behavior to reflect the values we affirm. Synagogues and churches need to be places where environmentalism has a home and where young people will learn that religion has something to say about the future of the planet on which we all live.

During our afternoon session, **Deputy Consul General of Israel Amir Sagie** shared some current insights into the present state of affairs in the Middle East. Cardinal Dolan introduced **Archbishop Bernadito Auza, Papal Nuncio to the United Nations**, who offered greetings from Pope Francis and highlighted the significance of the 1994 establishment of relations between the Vatican and Israel and of the work of the bilateral commission, since that time, trying to finalize a permanent agreement. There is now hope that a permanent agreement between Israel and the Vatican will soon be concluded. Asked why it has taken so long to conclude this work, he said: “We have so much to learn from each other.”

## **June 20, 2018**

Our June meeting between the National Council of Synagogues and the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was held at Cardinal Dolan’s office at the Cardinal Cooke Center in New York. The topic for discussion was religious identity and the rituals and traditions that define who is a Jew and who is a Catholic.

**Professor David Hoffman**, Vice Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, led the first part of the afternoon of study with a presentation on the significance of immersion and circumcision in establishing the covenant of Judaism as part of one’s identity. He noted that identifying someone as Jewish is established by birth (to a Jewish mother) or by conversion (equivalent to a re-birth as a new person) but that the ritual circumcision of boys does not in itself confer Jewish status. Professor Hoffman also noted

that volition is necessary for one who converts to Judaism, and one who is converted as a child has the right to reject and cancel that conversion on reaching adulthood.

Professor Hoffman also noted that the issue of belief was only introduced into the discussion of conversion, and of Jewish life in general, centuries after the Talmud. Affirmations of belief are not central to Jewish identity and not specifically required to join the Jewish people.

**Fr. Dennis McManus** of Georgetown University in Washington and St. John's Seminary, Boston, presented a paper on the topic: "Circumcision and Baptism: A Parting of the Ways?" Fr. McManus spoke of issues from the earliest days of the Church over the question of requiring Jewish rituals, such as circumcision, for Jewish followers of Jesus.

Introducing the central ritual of Baptism, Fr. McManus spoke of the use of water to symbolize creation and Baptism as admission into a covenant with Jesus and all that Jesus represents. Baptism washes away personal sin and original sin, brings a person into a covenantal relationship with Jesus, whether the person is male or female, promises eternal life, leads the way to the other sacraments of the Church, makes one a child of God, connects one eternally to Christ and makes a person's body a temple to Jesus. Fr. McManus noted that there is no equivalent in Catholic tradition to identity by birth. One is never born a Catholic, one is baptized as a Catholic, and although the Baptism nearly always takes place before a child can express his or her own volition, it is not fully valid until someone reaches adulthood and affirms it.

Fr. McManus also reviewed several situations in which the Catholic Church has recently worked to support the needs of Jews in ritual and in dialogue. He spoke of challenges to ritual slaughter and also to circumcision that had arisen in several places in Europe, and of the Church's work to protect the right of Jews to uphold their faith. *Nostra Aetate* was a turning point in the Church's vision of the Jewish people and also in the Church's understanding of itself. Fr. McManus also reported on the insistence of the Catholic Church in dialogue with other Christian denominations that the proselytization of Jews be removed as a stated goal, even at the cost of ending the dialogue.

Also at our June meeting, **Archbishop Bernadito Auza**, Papal Nuncio to the United Nations, shared a number of concerns regarding relations between the government of Israel and the Holy See. He reported that some agreements have been in place over the years, and that some issues have been in extended discussion and still await the conclusion of agreements.

Archbishop Auza also spoke of other work in which the Church has been involved at the United Nations, including rejection of Holocaust denial and support for refugees all over the world. He also expressed regret that the U. N. Council on Human Rights has not been responsive to proposals for change that would deny membership on the Council to nations that flagrantly abuse human rights and commented on the failure of the Council

to moderate its agenda, which now condemns Israel in its resolutions more than all other nations combined.

Deputy Consul General of Israel **Amir Sagie** reported that agreements on church property and other economic issues are nearing conclusion and should be finalized soon. He added that Israel is looking forward to the formal celebration of the twenty fifth anniversary of relations between the Israeli government and the Holy See.

It was announced that Deputy Consul Sagie would be leaving his post in August and returning to Israel. Cardinal Dolan presented him with a gift and expressed good wishes in behalf of the entire group.

## **The National Council of Churches**

**November 1, 2017**

A group of NCS leadership met in Washington, D. C. at the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism with representatives of the National Council of Churches, led by **NCC President Rev. Jim Winkler** and **NCS Chair Rabbi David Straus**. **Rev. Tony Kireopoulos** and **Rev. Nicole Diroff** worked with me on arranging the details of the program.

The meeting opened with self-introductions and continued with a welcome from **Rabbi Jonah Pesner**, Director of the Religious Action Center, who gave the background to the RAC, its building in Washington and its programs. **Rabbi David Saperstein** shared a reflection on the Torah reading of the week, emphasizing that in a time of crisis when there is much to be done, we have to take the lead and avoid the hesitation and paralysis that so often keep people back. **Rabbi Pesner** added that it is essential to bring together groups that will defend the most vulnerable, including immigrants, “dreamers” and refugees and women whose rights and safety have been threatened and that we must work to help our Muslim neighbors and others who may be marginalized. In the longer term we need to defend the integrity of our democracy, including the right to vote, and we need to encourage all to participate actively. Rabbi Pesner also spoke of the cancellation of the pre-High Holiday phone call for rabbis with President Trump and of the need for people who care about various issues to work together, even if we don’t always agree on all of the agenda before us.

**Rev. Jim Winkler** spoke of a rally planned for the National Mall on April 4, the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with the hope of bringing large numbers of people to advocate for issues of concern.

Rev. Winkler noted that in the previous administration, the N. C. C. and other faith groups were regularly connected through various consultations with the government. Now those consultations do not take place and a serious challenge is to make sure that

the cooperation continues. At present, lack of access to government makes work cooperative by our organizations more important than ever.

On the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, **Professor Darrell Jodock** led a review of the legacy of Martin Luther's challenges to the Roman Catholic Church, noting that Luther himself was reluctant to take the role of revolutionary and would have preferred to be part of a dialogue in which concerns shared by many were given a larger voice.

The Reformation began with Luther's challenge to the Indulgences that began as part of the confessional system and gradually became a very significant source of revenue for the Church and a form of exploitation resented by many. Luther rejected the notion of "buying salvation" as he saw it. Luther wanted not only religious reform but also social reform, seeking help for those who were in poverty beyond token charity that was extended. He advocated for universal public education, for men and for women, partly because of his desire for all to be able to study Scripture. He opposed the Crusades and educated himself in the traditions and teachings of Islam.

In Professor Jodock's words, "Reformers make mistakes." One of Luther's greatest mistakes was in his attitude toward the Jews and his increasing hostility toward Jews. In his life he probably did not know any Jews, but his rantings against them were used through the centuries that followed, culminating in their use by the Nazis in their rise to power and their perpetration of the Holocaust. These teachings the Lutheran Church has rejected in various statements over the course of recent decades.

In our continuing afternoon program, **Rabbi Elan Babchuck**, National Director of Innovation for CLAL (Center for Learning and Leadership) spoke by computer connection.

Rabbi Babchuck cited various statistics as to the ignorance of many people in Jewish and in Christian communities about the teachings of their faith and the meaning of denominational labels that are generally used. For many, young people especially, the labels matter less and less.

Rabbi Babchuck advocated searching for new solutions through the use of entrepreneurial techniques. It is important to know the circumstances of people's lives and understand what they seek to accomplish through things they do. His examples stressed searching for what is successful instead of analyzing and revising what is not working. Some members of the group expressed the concern that innovation can become a goal in itself instead of advancing the religious and spiritual goals of institutions/organizations and some asked whether the goal should be to build what people want as opposed to what we believe is important. All noted that isolation and separation from the community are major problems in religious life and in mental health.

**April 30 / May 1, 2018**

Our spring meeting with representatives of the National Council of Churches was coordinated by **Rabbi Wayne Franklin** and **Rev. Don Anderson** who welcomed us to their community in Providence, Rhode Island. We had the opportunity to meet and learn from a number of community scholars and leaders, recognizing the history of Providence as an early American center of religious diversity and also recognizing Rhode Island's troubled history as part of the slave trade.

**Professor Stanley Lemons**, Professor Emeritus at Rhode Island College, introduced the group to some of the history of the First Baptist Church in America, in which we were meeting, and the early history of Rhode Island. It was the first colony to receive a charter from the British Crown in which there was no mention of religion at all. Williams' notion of separating church and state made Rhode Island an opportune place for various religious groups, Jews included, to establish roots in America. Williams also called for a democratic system of government with opportunities for all to participate.

**Rabbi Sarah Mack** of Temple Beth El, **Rev. Chontell Washington** of the United Church of Christ and **Professor Arthur Urbano** of Providence College joined in a panel discussion on the history, programming and leadership of the **Rhode Island State Council of Churches**. The council, which dates back to 1937, identifies itself with the spirit of Roger Williams, and credits part of its success to the fact that Rhode Island is small enough for connections and contacts to be made easily among people in all parts of the state. The council is specifically focused on offering help to different groups in time of need, including anti-poverty efforts and outreach at times when anti-Semitism or anti-Muslim attitudes have become public concerns. The council sponsors a great deal of interfaith dialogue and multi-denominational programming.

**Rev. Tony Kireopoulos** and I offered brief introductions to some Middle Eastern issues. A number of people expressed a desire for more opportunity in the future to reflect on how these issues affect our communities, our work, and local interfaith relationships, and consensus was found in the idea of making space at future meetings to discuss how these impact on us. There was also substantial support for the idea of travel, as a group, to the Middle East.

**Elon Cook** of the Center for Reconciliation, introduced and presented a film, *Traces of the Trade: Stories from the Deep North*, about the slave trade and its history in Rhode Island, noting that much of the economy of the colony in its early years was fueled by the slave trade. The question of reparations was discussed as well, including the larger question of how the wrongs of the past can be set right in our generation and in the future.

**Rabbi Lewis Eron** presented texts and sources on slavery, noting that slavery is consistently regarded as immoral in Jewish tradition, but the idea of total abolition of slavery is a somewhat modern idea. Through most of history, some form of slavery was

in common practice nearly everywhere. And slavery continues in some places, even today.

**Rev. Nikita McCalister** spoke of the continuing ramifications of slavery in our time, even as we recognize significant Christian participation and justification of slavery in times past. At the same time, she used Christian sources, such as the Sermon on the Mount, to affirm that to be a follower of Jesus is to believe in liberation as God is on the side of the oppressed. It is up to us not only to change the language, but also to change to society in which we live.

**Judy Kaye**, President of Judith Kaye Training and Consulting, spoke of the importance of critical listening and learning how to respond. Many people don't understand white privilege beyond the simplest surface obligations. And many people don't understand their potential for helping. **Dr. Delbert Glover** of the Center for Reconciliation emphasized that any positive step must begin with recognizing the need to confront our history. The Center was established as a meeting place for secular and spiritual discussions, enabling conversations among different groups and sponsoring educational programs, tours and partnerships among community organizations. **Rev. Betsy Aldrich Garland** of the United Church of Christ spoke of the importance of sharing personal stories and spiritual autobiographies as part of developing curriculum for discussions about race. **The Rt. Rev. Nicholas Knisely**, Episcopal Bishop of Rhode Island, spoke of what is achieved when congregants recognize that they don't look like the neighborhood that surrounds them. Work begins with the realization that racism has a significant impact on experience and outlook even among very well-meaning caring people. It has been important in the work of the cathedral to bring different communities together at a common meeting ground.

## **Muslim Contacts**

We continue to reach out and seek programming opportunities with Muslim clergy and scholars. I was invited, through the National Council of Synagogues, to participate in a dialogue panel with Catholic and Muslim clergy in May, and we have kept in touch with some of those who met with us in June of 2016 in Washington, D. C. Regrettably, we have not been able to establish an ongoing dialogue group with Muslim leadership, although the effort continues.

## **Evangelical Protestant Leaders**

### **June 4-5, 2018**

The annual dialogue of Jews and Evangelical Protestants, organized and convened annually by **Rabbi Yehiel Poupko** of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, again brought together rabbis, pastors and academics from both communities in Washington, D. C. Although not officially part of the work of the National Council of Synagogues, approximately half of the Jewish participants this year were members of our

Executive Committee. Stimulating discussion and academic presentations help to foster a greater appreciation in both communities for concerns of the other. Rabbi Poupko's work has helped to inspire better understanding among Jews of the religious, political and social concerns this very significant leadership group of Christians.

## **Finances**

We have been fortunate to receive generous support from the **Nathan Cummings Foundation**, with the support and encouragement of Michael Cummings and Hannah Cummings, from the **Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue** of the Jewish Theological Seminary in addition to other individual donors and charitable foundations who have renewed generous funding from years past. We have also received generous donations from members of our Executive Committee and from a number of congregation rabbis who have graciously joined in support of our work. This funding, in addition to the ongoing support we receive from the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Rabbinical Assembly, The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association, the Union for Reform Judaism and the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, makes our work possible. We are grateful to each and to all.

We have shared preliminary proposals for joint travel of rabbis and ministers to the Middle East with the goal of advancing mutual understanding. These projects have been discussed with various potential donors and still await formal approval as well as clearance on the complicated calendars of our various organizations.

## **Minutes and Papers**

Minutes of conferences and papers presented at our meetings are made available, as they are edited and approved, on our website, [nationalcouncilofsynagogues.org](http://nationalcouncilofsynagogues.org).

## **Many thanks**

**Rabbi David Straus** and **Rabbi Wayne Franklin**, Chair and Vice Chair of the National Council of Synagogues, have shared advice, wisdom and support as each program and challenge of the year was under consideration. Both are actively involved in pulpit work and in numerous endeavors in their own communities, yet always make time available to for helping and planning every aspect of what we do. I cannot thank them enough for all they do.

**Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal**, our founding director, continues to be a source of inspiration and wise counsel, and that is a precious gift for which we are always grateful.

We thank the Rabbinical Assembly, specifically **Gina Morales**, who administers our finances, keeps our books up to date and pays our bills, and to **Rabbi Julie Schonfeld**, whose encouragement and support makes so much of what we do possible.

As our budgets are limited, all the members of **our leadership** participate in meetings and programs at their own expense. Our **guest speakers** are not paid for their time or their preparation. We cannot adequately thank them for their generosity and personal sacrifice. We are profoundly grateful for all they have contributed.

It is a privilege to be included in the work of promoting better understanding among clergy and lay leadership of different faiths. Many thanks to all who are part of this effort.

Respectfully submitted,

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