

**SIXTH ANNUAL MEETING BETWEEN THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS LEADERS
AND THE EVANGELICALS
JUNE 9-10, 2014**

Over 40 Jewish and Evangelical religious leaders held their sixth meeting in Washington, DC from June 9-10. Three topics were discussed: Jewish Roots of Christianity; Criticism of the State of Israel and Proselytizing Jews.

Professor Marvin Wilson of Gordon College conducted the first session on his new book, *Exploring Our Hebraic Heritage*, especially chapter 3 that had been mailed in advance to the delegates. He stressed that Jews and Christians “share a book, and therefore have a shared heritage.” For Christians to limit their studies to Christian sources alone and ignore Hebraic roots is myopic. Christians ought engage Jewish commentaries on Scripture and prevent a narrow view of the Bible. We also need shared conversations on our origins. Rabbinic commentaries are an indispensable source of knowledge. We need theological eclecticism and openness and avoid cherry picking sources. Remember, he noted, the Apostles had the Hebrew Bible as their inspiration and Abraham is to be seen as “the bookend of Scripture”—its beginnings and its final bookend of redemption. He showed us the way to be questioners of God who struggle constantly with faith,

Wilson rejects supersessionism and a dialogue that is merely “polite shadow boxing.” But participants in dialogue must enter with some modesty. Dialogue is not the place to demolish the other or exalt oneself. Authentic dialogue is not designed to melt down faith or homogenize beliefs but is an invitation to learn. Conversation with the other tells us of God and the beauty of the other, what Krister Stendahl described as “holy envy.” Theology must be combined with just and righteous deeds. We must also recall that God’s covenant with Israel is irrevocable because God is not a fickle being.

Interfaith discussions help cross boundaries and highlight the understanding that Jesus agreed with much of the Pharisees, something that is difficult for many Christians to grasp. The Bible and the Oral Law is seamless but open to constant interpretation. How do Jews and Christians read Scriptures? Christians read them through the Jesus Christ event; Jews read them through the eyes of the sages. Can we read these texts as historical narratives or is that not possible? Sadly, Christians have often misused Jewish texts or traditions—viz., the Christians who conduct a Jewish “Seder.” He noted that one can be a bad Jew and not be expelled but in the Evangelical community, a bad evangelical can be kicked out.

A discussion followed on the nature of the Pharisees, the litmus test of who is a Jew and whether one may accept Jesus as the messiah and still be a Jew. The Jewish participants responded that once one becomes a Christian, he or she has crossed the Rubicon and left the Jewish fold no matter what the messianic Jews or Jews for Jesus claim. A long discussion followed in which the Jewish participants stressed that it is offensive to consider messianic Jews as bone fide Jews and the Jewish community is quite sensitive to this aberration.

The evening session was based on a document sent to the delegates on what constitutes legitimate criticism of the State of Israel and what borders on anti-Semitism. Dr. Paul DeVries, president of the New York Divinity School, led the discussion. He noted that you can love someone and yet be critical of that someone. All seemed to agree that a one-state solution is not feasible because it has no historical precedent (viz., Lebanon) and it

would destroy the Jewish State. The approach of John Hagee and colleagues is totally at odds with what young Evangelicals believe, since they are much more socially and politically liberal, on the whole. They also support Israel for Eschatological reasons and that is problematic. But Evangelicals are Israel's best friends--although the younger generation is not quite so committed. The middle approach seems to be losing ground among the younger folks.

Do we hold Israel to higher moral standards? That is a very touchy issue and one that leads to considerable controversy and debate.

The third session was chaired by David Neff, emeritus editor of *Christianity Today* and Rabbi David Sandmel, newly appointed head of interreligious and intergroup relations for the ADL. Rev. Neff noted that in the Christian notion of evangelizing, all must be told of their sins and informed of the gospel of Jesus in order to be saved. Witnessing must be set in a cultural frame. Jews continue to stress the relevance of ritual—"works of righteousness" that are often at variance with faith alone. The dilemma is: If Jews are still in the covenant then they do not need to be saved for they are already saved. Billy Graham, at one point in his mission, excluded Jews from salvation but by 1973, he changed his view and indicated that Jews have a special relationship with God and the covenant is still valid.

What of the so-called "messianic Jews" and "Jews for Jesus?" People like the late Moses Rosen and others like him practiced deception and the so-called "messianic rabbis" are deliberating misleading uninformed Jews. While we concede the ongoing covenant as valid for Jews, Evangelicals have a legitimate duty to frame the New Testament for Jews. And we should remember that for years now, Christian Zionists helped create the new State of Israel.

Rabbi Sandmel noted that Judaism is not a missionizing religion. Our covenant is unique and no-Jews need not convert to Judaism for "salvation" is available to all by abiding by the Seven Noahide Laws. Our eschatological hope is that all will worship one God. One of the reasons we did not seek to convert others was the danger that such actions incurred at the hands of the authorities. When we are told of conferences such as the one in England in 2011 that announced that Jews must be targeted, we respond that this is a "gentler form of genocide." The cross and the swastika both spell the end of Judaism. Most Jews do not perceive a mission to the Jews an act of love and they don't really know much about the evangelical world. But we view conversion as an act of betrayal of peoplehood. Yes, we understand the need for Christians to witness for their faith as part of their identity. But how is that done? What techniques are utilized? Often, the techniques are insulting to Jews. Perhaps a little more humility is needed; invite me but remember that "no" means just that. Perhaps it is best if, as one scholar put it, "you just leave us alone"

A lively discussion followed. Ten years ago, Jews knew little about Evangelicals but not today. We know that most are philo-Semites and they are stunned by the equation of the swastika and the cross. We need to meet and ask each other candid questions. Christians must lead an exemplary life for that is the true way to evangelize. It is Christians' duty to bring the message of the "good news" to all. But Jews are allergic to this and fearful for we have known the meaning of coercive techniques from our long, bitter experience.

Rabbi Gil Rosenthal noted that instead of an estimated 100 million Jews in the world today, there are only 16-17 million—the results of missionizing, massacres, expulsions pogroms, genocide, the Holocaust and all the rest. There is the ever-present danger of believing *extra ecclesium nulla salus*, a religious imperialism that teaches I am in--you are out; I have the keys to the Kingdom; my way or the highway; I'm saved, you are damned. As Hans Kung put it so aptly, there can be no peace among nations until there is peace between the various religions.

Salvation is not pivotal or central in Judaism as it is in Christianity. Prof. Amy Jill Levine observed that in Judaism we do not have much God-talk; in Evangelical Christianity that is vital. Jews maintain that faith must be demonstrated by faithful actions.

A number of suggestions for future meetings were offered including, inviting young Evangelicals, discussing the validity of evangelizing in Israel, the issue of supersessionism, the meaning of resurrection, how to enlarge the number of attendees at sessions, jointly study relevant texts, perhaps inviting Roman Catholics, and so forth.

Ethan Felson, David Neff and Rabbi Yehiel Poupko planned the meeting once again.