

**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES
UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS**

November 9, 2017
SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF JUDAISM, NY

Attendance:

Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Rabbi Harold Berman, Rabbi Alvin Berkun, Rabbi Adam Gregerman, Leslie Brier, Martin Budd, , Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi David Sandmel, Rabbi Jonathan Waxman, Rabbi Avi Winokur, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg

Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Rev. Al Baca, Rev. Lawrence Frizzell, Msgr. John Kozar, Bishop Basil Losten, Bishop Denis Madden, Bishop James Massa, Bishop Basil Losten, Msgr. Guy Massie, Rev. Brian McWeeney, Msgr. Guy Massie, Rev. David Michael, Msgr. Robert Stern, Bishop David Zubik, Ms. Nancy Robinson

MINUTES RECORDED BY RABBI HAROLD BERMAN

Guests:

Msgr. Kevin Irwin, Rabbi Arthur Green, Deputy Consul General of Israel Amir Sagie, Consulate of Israel Director of Regional Affairs Michael Alexander, Papal Nuncio Archbishop Bernadito Auza

Cardinal Timothy Dolan opened the meeting with prayer noting that our prayers are also with Rev. Dennis McManus who is helping to care for his ailing mother.

Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Herman, Rabbi of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, offered a welcome to the synagogue, which is the founding synagogue of the Reconstructionist movement of Judaism, established by the late Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan.

Cardinal Dolan introduced **Professor Kevin Irwin**, former Dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America. Copies of his book, *A Commentary on Laudato Si*, and copies of the Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis, *On Care for our Common Home (Laudato Si)*, were made available.

Msgr. Irwin opened with the observation that previous writing on issues regarding the environment were broad, but not deep. Each pope draws from previous experience and areas of expertise to extend the teachings of the Church in ways that reflect his style of ministry. All previously had comments about the environment as part of their teaching.

Pope Francis, who holds a degree in chemistry, had previously edited materials and written about pollution, lifestyle concerns, working conditions, technology and corporate ethics when he was a bishop in Latin America. His style is to draw from all kinds of works and research from all over the world, in contrast to some of his

predecessors who tended to quote almost exclusively from Scripture and from the writings of other popes.

The Encyclical 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 a better life. There is a need for action, not just words. And there is a need for prayer that will impel people toward action.

It was noted in the discussion that followed that many lay people have already moved beyond the teaching of their leaders, and that many individual states and localities have moved beyond their national politicians. The Pope has 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, was introduced by Rabbi Steve Gutow. His paper, “Religion and Environmental Responsibility: A Jewish Catholic Conversation,” is available on the website of the National Council of Synagogues, as is his liturgical program, “Ma’madot.”

Rabbi Green spoke of environmental concerns as issues in humanity’s need to seek salvation. He noted 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 (paper distributed) to add devotions to our daily prayers.

Pope Francis focused in his encyclical on the people who are most vulnerable to changes in the environment, and Rabbi Green added that our further concern needs to be the ultimate survival of the planet, of God’s creation itself.

Rabbi Green noted that God is revealed to us when we are ready to discover Him. When we were slaves in Egypt (Hebrew: Mitzrayim – a word that means narrowness) we found it hard to hear the word of God. It is necessary to remove constrictions in order to hear the divine voice: constrictions such as poverty, addiction, sexual obsession, and an endless striving to reach above other people that prevents us from recognizing that we need each other.

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.

Discussion that followed brought out further issues, including a rejection of the idea that science is a way of dominating nature. “We are part of the symphony – not conductors of the symphony.” 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.

It was agreed that we all need to issue statements, together and separately, and that sharing of the statements and teachings we shared in our program is critical.

During the lunch break, **Debbie Rudt**, Executive Director of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, led a tour of the synagogue’s sanctuary and offered more information about the style of its worship and the philosophy of the congregation.

Deputy Consul General of Israel Amir Sagie shared some current insights into the present state of affairs in the Middle East. The bad news is that some troublesome things have not improved. The Iran/Saudi confrontation is still significant, the recent resignation of the Prime Minister of Lebanon is not a good sign. Iran’s efforts toward hegemony in the region and its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons are behind much of the instability in the region. However, cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, a new development, is a positive.

In terms of good news, Israel expects to have final discussions toward an economic agreement between itself and the Vatican at the end of November. This has been a long time in coming, but hopefully it is nearing conclusion. A new Papal Nuncio is about to arrive in Israel. Israel is allocating 50 million N.I.S. for Christian schools in addition to offering funding for three additional hours of education. There is extensive cooperation between the Israel Museum and the Vatican.

Mr. Sagie also discussed the document: “Between Rome and Jerusalem,” a statement issued by Orthodox Rabbis and spoke of training for European Christian scholars taking place in Israel at Yad Vashem. He concluded his remarks by saying that Israel continues to be a safe haven for Christians and Christianity in a turbulent Middle East.

Discussion that followed Mr. Sagie’s presentation included mention of the concerns that many non-Orthodox rabbis have about policies and political positions taken by Israel’s Chief Rabbinate. There was also mention of the ongoing problem of Yeshivah students not serving in the Israel Defense Forces.

Regarding the topic of the day, the environment, it was noted that the discovery of natural gas in the Mediterranean offers an energy source that is better for the environment than other fossil fuels. Israel's success in desalination and its extensive use of recycled water (the most of any country in the world) have had a very positive impact. Israel is now in a position to export water and is exporting water to Jordan. Despite reports to the contrary, there is much cooperation with Palestinians and Jordanians over water resources. And Israel is investing heavily in research and development on renewable energy sources.

Cardinal Dolan introduced **Archbishop Bernadito Auza, Papal Nuncio to the United Nations**, who offered greetings from Pope Francis. Archbishop Auza 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."

Examples of cooperation between Israel and the Vatican include the recent discovery of a synagogue in Magdala and the work of excavating and presenting it in a way that shows maximum respect for both religious traditions.

Persecution of Christians in other parts of the world continues to be a source of great sorrow and grave concern. Advocacy by all who are concerned has made a difference. Credit goes to the present American administration for its efforts in helping Christian communities in various places.

It was suggested that we try to use the day after our next meeting to visit Washington, D. C., and make contact with Members of Congress and Senators, although the scheduling of the meeting for the week after elections suggests that few political leaders will be in Washington at that time.

The next meeting of the group will take place in New York at the Catholic Center on Tuesday, June 20. Suggestions for discussion involved sharing perspectives of, and with, the Evangelical Christian community and/or discussions on the nature and the growth of the Latino community.

The meeting for the fall of 2018 was scheduled for Thursday, November 15, in Baltimore. A suggestion was made that we invite the U. S. Ambassador for Religious Freedom, as we did in the fall of 2016.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman