

Standing with God Together: Accommodating Conservatives and Liberals in our Congregational Setting

National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues

**October 5, 2021
On-line meeting**

MINUTES

Attendance: NCS – Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Martin Budd, Dr. Adam Gregerman, Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Rabbi Daniel Polish, Rabbi David Sandmel, Rabbi David Saperstein, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Rabbi Harold Berman

Attendance: NCC – Rev. Michael Agar, Rev. Dominick Ackerman, Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson, Rev. Dr. Peter Baktis, Rev. Dr. Whit Bodman, Rev. Dr. Allen Hilton, Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock, Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Dr. Peter Makari, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Rev. Mark Pettis, Rev. Margaret Rose, Rev. Don Thorsen, Ms. Maryl Walters, Dr. Tony Kireopoulos, Mr. Jim Winkler

Guests: Professor Arnold Eisen, Rev. Laura Osbourne

Mark Pettis introduced Rev. Laura Osbourne to lead text study.

Rev. Osbourne shared texts from **Colossians, Chapter 3**, highlighting the teaching: "Bear with one another..." imploring forgiveness. The wardrobe prescribed in the text includes compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength and dignity. Regretfully, we have seen, in our time, an increase in division and a loss of middle ground. While God brings things together, people rip things apart.

The message of the text is to try to remove the anger and clothe ourselves with love.

Elyse Wechterman raised the question of how we deal with the fact that while we all applaud such texts, many people can adapt them and apply them to various issues as they choose.

The final challenge, Rev. Osbourne concluded, is to be able to love even our enemies.

Mark Pettis opened the discussion by suggesting that the challenge is to bear with each other and be satisfied with not needing to win every argument. **Peter Baktis** used the example of the political exhortation: "When they go low, we go high."

Harold Berman introduced Professor Arnold Eisen

Professor Eisen opened his remarks by noting that at the Jewish Theological Seminary there have always been many views concerning issues of the day. Some want to avoid talking about them, some want to talk about them and some want to talk as long as others are going to agree with them.

From the texts that had been distributed, Professor Eisen quoted **Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel** in his remarks from a conference in 1963 at which he came to know **The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** Heschel taught that the first conference on religion and race was between Moses and Pharaoh and noted that the outcome of that summit meeting has not come to an end. Heschel spoke of his inability to compromise on certain moral issues.

Professor Eisen raised the question of how Heschel felt the authority to identify opponents of civil rights with Pharaoh, and he raised the question in an interview with him. Heschel said that he identified himself as the heir to a great religious tradition, with the need to speak from that tradition even if others may disagree. When the issue was the Vietnam War, Heschel believed that this war was evil, not simply wrong, because the suffering imposed the population involved was far out of proportion to what good might come from it. Heschel encouraged Dr. King to speak out against the war.

Returning to the question of authority from the Prophets, Professor Eisen used a quotation from Heschel's book, **The Prophets**: "What is the essence of being a prophet? *A prophet is a person who holds God and men in one thought at one time, at all times. Our tragedy begins with the segregation of God, with the bifurcation of the secular and the sacred. We worry more about the purity of dogma than about the integrity of love. We think of God in the past tense and refuse to realize that God is always present and never, never past; that God may be more intimately present in slums than in mansions, with those who are smarting under the abuse of the callous.*"

The prophet has two tasks: to intuit God's will and to translate God's will into language and into action that must be taken. Heschel taught that Torah is not God's word, but rather is a *Midrash* on God's word. The prophet feels with God. He feels sympathy with God's emotions. God suffers because of human suffering and calls on humans to be partners in relieving that suffering. One of his greatest teachings is that: "Some are guilty, but all are responsible."

Quoting Genesis, regarding the covenant with Noah, Heschel notes that God refuses to take the opportunity of starting all over again. God chooses to live with compromise, knowing that humanity will not answer every challenge as it should.

Professor Eisen encouraged rabbis to speak about moral issues from Jewish tradition and Jewish text and encouraged ministers to find a parallel path in their tradition. The problem is that although the values at stake may be straightforward, the "how" of achieving a goal may be the subject of debate. It is impossible to take a moral stand without being criticized for politicization.

Response by Jim Winkler

Jim Winkler shared his experience in conducting seminars on sharing political issues in congregational settings. He noted that most, but not all, churches avoid political matters. This enables mainline churches to have Republicans and Democrats sitting and worshipping together. What is required is a bit of humility and patience. The stories that are shared are among the most important things that people have. The debate is over how those stories are used.

Continuing, Jim Winkler emphasized that there must be ground rules to avoid raising anxiety to unpleasant levels, but he noted that it is not always possible to engage or to placate everyone. He added that our churches and synagogues, in today's society, are among the last places remaining where people can safely listen to, and share, differing opinions.

Kathryn Lohre noted that in following guidelines from national church leadership there are yet accusations of not doing enough to advance various concerns and causes.

Elyse Wechterman raised the concern that it is hard to separate moral teaching from politics. She also noted that many synagogues, especially in the liberal movements, bring together people who tend to be morally aligned with one another. She expressed concern for missing the views of people that are not included because they come from different educational backgrounds, economic classes and ethnic groups.

Leonard Gordon expressed a concern that arguments over details and specifics of policy sometimes obscure larger moral statements with which there should be broad agreement.

Margaret Rose cited the current New York Times editorial about the last Jew in Afghanistan, noting the concern in the last paragraph that we have difficulty in dealing with people who are not like us.

Arnold Eisen responded that getting people together, so they can know each other and listen to each other tends to foster a greater willingness to tolerate each other's diverse opinions and backgrounds. He added that in today's context there is a difference between people who claim the mantle of prophecy and people who humbly share the lessons of the prophets. Those who claim the mantle of prophecy can be scary. Those who share lessons with humility are more likely to be heard.

Closing

In closing, **Tony Kireopoulos** expressed thanks to our speakers and to all who participated.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues