

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES 2013-2014

The activities of the National Council of Synagogues in 2013-2014 were varied and interesting as usual. I represented the NCS at a meeting at Nazareth College in Rochester, N.Y. from June 23-25. The topic: "Sacred Texts and Human Contexts: A Symposium on the Role of the Sacred Texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Uniting and Dividing Humanity." About 75 delegates were in attendance from all over the world (including Saudi Arabia) and there was a heavy representation of Muslim participants. I read a paper on the topic, "Salvation and the Jewish Concept of *Hasidei Umot Ha-Olam*." The speakers at the plenary session were outstanding and the give and take after the presentations of the various papers made for an enlightening and enriching experience.

Rabbi David Straus, chairman of the NCS, and Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal held a first-time ever meeting with leaders of the Muslim community when they met at the national headquarters of ISNA (The Islamic Society of North America) in their Washington offices. A very fruitful and friendly several hours were spent with Dr. Sayyid Syeed, executive director of ISNA, and Imam Maggid, their president. Suggestions were made as to how to develop a relationship between the two faith groups, how to dispel mistrust and hatred, and how to chart a new course that would bring better understanding, respect and cooperation between the two groups. Tentative plans were drawn up for a joint session some time in the fall of 2014. Rabbi Straus and Rabbi Rosenthal held several phone conversations on the subject with Dr. Jihad Turk of Claremont College in California with the hope that a specific program or conference might develop from these informal chats.

The semi-annual meeting with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops was held at St. Mary's College and Seminary in Baltimore from October 21-22, 2013. The topic was: "Seminary Education about Other Faiths." The Jewish presenter was Professor Michael Cook of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and Father John Crossin of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington. Both indicated that not enough attention in the curricula of the various seminaries is devoted to an understanding of other faith groups, their history and their theology. Rabbi A. Nathan Abramowitz of Georgetown University and Father David Michael of St. Joseph's Parish in Needham, Massachusetts, taught appropriate texts from Jewish and Catholic sources on the subject of the meeting.

The sixth annual meeting with Evangelical leaders took place in Washington, DC from June 9-10 2014. The speaker at the first session was Professor Marvin Wilson of Gordon College, Massachusetts, who discussed the thesis of his latest book, *Exploring our Hebraic Heritage: A Christian Theology of Roots and Renewal*. Small group discussions followed. The evening session focused on the matter of criticism of the State of Israel and the difference between criticism and bias against the state. Dr. Paul de Vries of the New York Divinity School gave an overview of the subject which again was followed up by small group discussions. On Tuesday morning, the group analyzed the issue of evangelizing Jews with presentations by Rev. David Neff, emeritus editor of *Christianity Today*, and Rabbi David Sandmel, the new director of interfaith affairs of the Anti-Defamation League. Once again, small groups analyzed the presentations and a report on the group discussions to the plenary ended the conference. The NCS delegation included Rabbis Alvin Berkun, Gilbert S. Rosenthal, David Straus and Jeffrey Wohlberg.

The spring meeting with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops took place on June 25, 2014 in New York at the Catholic Center, hosted by Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan. The topic was: “Preliminary Reactions to Pope Francis I.” The presenters were Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center in Washington, DC, and Rev. Drew Christiansen, SJ, of Georgetown University. Both were enthusiastic in their evaluation of the new Pope Francis I and his outreach to the poor and disadvantaged, his stress on revitalizing the Church, and his warm relations with the Jewish people.

Regrettably, for the second year no meeting took place between the NCS and the NCC (Protestant) although private planning sessions between Rabbi Rosenthal and Rev. Tony Kireopoulos were held throughout the year in the hope that eventually we would resume our relationship and meet again to discuss significant issues and address serious problems. At this writing, we are gratified to learn that a meeting is finally being planned for the fall of 2014 between the two organizations.

Additionally, we update our website regularly with new documents and information about our activities.

Apart from these formal programs, I regularly meet with or conduct phone sessions with Father Dennis McManus of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. I also held regular briefings with Noam Katz, Minister of Public Diplomacy of the Embassy of Israel in Washington, to receive updates on issues of importance to the various religious communities. And of course, there was the need to raise our budget of \$35,000 annually—an effort that seems more difficult and challenging these days. Thanks to kind and caring colleagues and wonderfully generous lay persons, we met our goal.

Rabbi Gilbert S. Rosenthal
Director