

## Of (Religious) Fences and Neighbors

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By **Meir Soloveichik** From issue: **March 2007**

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In 2003, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, headed by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, issued a document entitled “The Jewish People and the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Bible.” In it, the Church asserted its recognition that Jews and Christians wait together for an ultimate redemption even as the Church, for its part, understands that the redeemer has been here before.

Responding to the commission’s work, Rabbi James Rudin, the senior interreligious adviser of the American Jewish Committee, argued that it was not enough for the Vatican to recognize that Jews wait for the messiah. For there to be a genuine step forward in relations between the two faiths, the Church, wrote Rabbi Rudin, should declare its understanding that “the messiah’s *identity* [emphasis added] remains unknown, and Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the messiah, is not waiting at the end of days for Jews to recognize the ‘error of their ways.’”

Rabbi Rudin’s statement reflects one approach to “interfaith dialogue,” an enterprise that gained increased currency in the wake of the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960’s and that has since become a fixture of the American religious scene. In 1965, the council issued a statement entitled *Nostra Aetate*, in which the Church declared that the Jews as a whole were not guilty of deicide and that it was interested in engaging the Jewish community. For many representatives of Jewish organizations involved in the ensuing dialogue, it was considered sufficient to emphasize moral commonalities between the two religions and to focus debate on such issues as contemporary Christianity’s attitude to the state of Israel. As for matters of profound doctrinal or theological division, these were left to the side. Rabbi Rudin’s statement reflects a seemingly different but increasingly salient approach: when an offending doctrine—in this case,

the core Christian belief concerning what will happen at the end of days—cannot be ignored, the solution is to suggest that it simply be dispensed with, or somehow relativized so that the faiths appear to be less in conflict.

But, whatever one may make of the earlier approach to doctrinal differences, does this one make sense? As the historian Rabbi David Berger observed in a published comment on Rabbi Rudin's position, no Christian who sincerely believes that Jesus is the messiah can "simultaneously refrain from asserting that Jews will discover this at the end of days." Whatever the participants in interfaith dialogue may believe to the contrary, Berger wrote, Jews have no more right to "demand that Christians reject one of the core beliefs of Christianity" than Christians have the right to "demand that traditional Jews give up their conviction that at the end of days all the world will recognize the messiah—and that he will *not* be Jesus of Nazareth" (emphasis added).

What, then, is left for those believing Christians and Jews who are still eager to maintain friendships across religious boundaries? The answer is clear. Religions by definition disagree as to the truth—a reality that cannot be overcome by demanding that one or the other faith repudiate its claim to truth. Better by far to heed the wisdom of the old maxim that good fences make good neighbors, with the codicil that over those fences, good neighbors still have much to learn from each other—perhaps even more to learn than by pretending that fences serve no useful purpose.

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Such, at any rate, is the message of a remarkable new book, *Strangers and Neighbors: What I Have Learned about Christianity by Living Among Orthodox Jews*.<sup>\*</sup> The book's author, Maria Johnson, is an Oxford-trained Catholic theologian who teaches religion at the University of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Asked by her school to give an introductory course in the Bible—a subject she felt less prepared to address than systematic theology—Johnson chose to approach the text as a work of literature, inviting her students to read it as a self-contained story without pondering its possible relevance to life today.

As it happens, a number of fervently Orthodox Jews live in Johnson's neighborhood in Scranton, and on her way to and from class she would regularly pass by their homes. Hearing them call

each other by names like Yosef and Tzipporah, she found herself overwhelmed by the fact that there, right next door, were “descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, . . . blood relatives of Moses, Aaron, and David, of Hosea, Hezekiah, and Nehemiah.” The story of the Bible, she was forced to conclude, seemed to be “alive and well”—after all, “you don’t run into the descendants of Oliver Twist or find yourself living down the road from people who trace their ancestry back to Anna Karenina or Huck Finn.”

Both Johnson and her husband were professional theologians, trained, as she writes, “to chart the web of typological connections between the Testaments or explain the relevance of the Jewish sacrificial system to an understanding of the Crucifixion.” And yet, before moving into this neighborhood, they had had “no real sense of Judaism as a living reality.” She soon made the acquaintance of two Orthodox families on her block; acquaintance blossomed into friendship; and friendship—“the women and I lend each other maternity clothes and go to the gym together; our husbands borrow each other’s snow shovels and power tools and grumble about local politics; our children are in and out of each other’s houses”—resulted in something more: the exposure of Maria Johnson and her family to Orthodox life.

Even as they remain devout Roman Catholics, the Johnsons now take it for granted that every year they will spend time in a sukkah, watch the lighting of Hanukkah candles, attend readings of the Book of Esther on Purim, and sit regularly at a Sabbath table for dinner. For these Christians, the Jewish calendar and its celebrations “have become part of our year just as *shabbos* has become part of our week—a counterpoint playing softly under the melody of the Church’s calendar, creating unexpected and poignant harmonies.” Johnson’s young children Catherine and Elizabeth now have friends named Yaffa and Yosef, and consider themselves authorities on Judaism:

Once, on vacation, we found ourselves in a museum elevator with an Orthodox family. Fearing what might happen, I jabbered merrily about the dinosaurs but to no avail—Catherine and Elizabeth chirped in unison “Oh, hello! You’re Jews!” The doors opened before I had time to stammer out an explanation. Then there was the time at the park when Catherine was playing with a little boy while I chatted to his very pleasant father. When the boy mentioned that he was Jewish, “Catherine looked him up and down—no yarmulke, no tzitzis [ritual fringes]—and said coolly, ‘Hmm, you must be one of those Jews who don’t know their mitzvahs.’”

*Strangers and Neighbors* is not a sociological analysis of American Jewry, or even of Orthodox Jewry. Johnson is well aware that she has been exposed to a very small segment of Orthodoxy, and that her friendship with these religious Jews could flourish only by happenstance, because Scranton's relatively small Orthodox community is more intermixed with its Gentile neighbors than is the case with such large and self-sustaining communities as those in Lakewood, New Jersey or Monsey, New York. Still, on the question of how best to achieve amicable relations among adherents of different faiths, Johnson's little book contains more insight than much that has been said and written about this subject in the past decades.

To see why this is so, we need to return to the theological scene of the 1960's.

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In 1965, the theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel took up a visiting professorship at Union Theological Seminary, a New York training school for Protestant ministers. In his inaugural lecture, later published under the title "No Religion Is an Island," Heschel expressed his enthusiasm for the prospects of interfaith dialogue in the wake of the recent Vatican Council and of *Nostra Aetate*. Acknowledging the obstacles still remaining, he went right to the basic one: "Is not truth exclusive?" Interestingly, he answered as follows:

The ultimate truth is not capable of being fully and adequately expressed in concepts and words. . . . Revelation is always an accommodation to the capacity of man. No two minds are alike, just as no two faces are alike. The voice of God reaches the spirit of man in a variety of ways, in a multiplicity of languages. One truth comes to expression in many ways of understanding.

To Heschel, it was thus not necessary for a believer to hold that Judaism was true and Christianity false, or vice-versa. Rather, both were to be seen as valid expressions of a larger, inexpressible truth. Each faith ought to see the other, in Heschel's phrase, as "His Majesty's loyal opposition."

Forty years later, this view still remains prevalent among some prominent Jewish thinkers. Soon after September 11, 2001, for example, the Israeli philosopher Rabbi David Hartman (who was

born and educated in the United States) was approached by the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman for advice on how best to fight a war against religious totalitarianism. "All faiths that come out of the biblical tradition," replied Rabbi Hartman,

have the tendency to believe that they have the exclusive truth. When the Taliban wiped out the Buddhist statues [in Afghanistan], that's what they were saying. But others have said it too. The opposite of religious totalitarianism is an ideology of pluralism—an ideology that embraces religious diversity and the idea that my faith can be nurtured without claiming exclusive truth.

Pronouncing himself in agreement with this formula, Friedman wondered in print whether Jews, Christians, and Muslims might yet come to share Rabbi Hartman's vision that "God speaks Arabic on Fridays, Hebrew on Saturdays, and Latin on Sundays." He proclaimed the rabbi a "general" in the war on religious totalitarianism—a war in which, presumably, a Jew or Christian who believes that he adheres to the one true faith should be regarded as fighting for the wrong side.

Perhaps the most prominent Jewish proponent of this general approach today is the theologian Rabbi Irving Greenberg, whose recent collection of essays is entitled *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*. Like Rabbi Hartman, Rabbi Greenberg advocates a theology of "covenantal pluralism," according to which both Jews and Christians hold equally valid contracts with God, and both are, in a certain sense, members of the nation Israel—albeit with different roles to play. "Why," asks Rabbi Greenberg, "is it necessary for Jews (or other religions) to insist that the truth of their historical experience with God . . . negates Christianity's claims?" In his view, it is possible that God truly did become incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, but wanted only Christians and not Jews to affirm that He did so. To traditional Jews and Christians who believe that only one of their respective faiths will be proved true at the end of time, Rabbi Greenberg suggests that "we may underrate the wonder and power of the Lord."

To capture the essence of what he is after, Rabbi Greenberg cites a short story he himself once wrote. In this story, the messiah comes at the end of days. Jews and Christians march out to greet him and establish his reign. Finally they ask if this is his first coming or his second coming—to which the messiah smiles and replies, "No comment."

Perhaps then, Rabbi Greenberg concludes, each faith will “truly realize” that its journey “was worth it for the kind of life we lived along the way.”

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Rabbi Greenberg insists that his approach does not “dilute Judaism’s independence or collapse the distinctions between Judaism and Christianity.” Nor, he writes, is he endorsing relativism, but rather “an absolutism that has come to recognize its own limitations.” But if this is not relativism, what is? A defining feature of any faith is its claim to be truer than any other. Proposing that it gut itself of that feature, retaining only its attachment to “the kind of life we lived along the way,” is akin to asking it to cease to exist as a faith.

For traditional Jews, theologies like Heschel’s, Hartman’s, and Greenberg’s raise the question of why Judaism is or ever has been a faith worth dying for. If the dispute over whether Jesus is the messiah is not centrally important, and if God does not value one faith over another, why ought Jews to have willingly suffered martyrdom in the past, and why should Jews today honor them for it? An analogous question might be asked by Christians. Indeed, as Randi Rashkover of York University has noted, if Heschel is correct, it would seem that “the traditionalist Jew or Christian has no good reason for being a Jew or Christian: both expressions of revelation are equally valid because both are equally partial.” The same can be said of the views of Rabbi Greenberg—and, in his own way, of Rabbi Rudin.

It is precisely because such questions cannot honestly be elided that an interfaith dialogue that seeks to minimize the sheer magnitude of religious differences is theologically self-defeating, and again hardly for the Jewish partners alone. As far back as the time of the Second Vatican Council, this point was grasped with particular clarity by the talmudist and philosopher Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, to dispense with the exclusivity of truth claims, as some were advocating, would end not by building bridges between Judaism and Christianity but rather by destroying the essence of each. As he remarked in a 1964 talk (subsequently published under the title “Confrontation” in the journal *Tradition*), “Standardization of practices, equalization of dogmatic certitudes, and the waiving of eschatological claims spell the end of the vibrant and great faith experience of any religious community.”

For Rabbi Soloveitchik, it was wrongheaded to deny that traditional Jews and Christians proclaim contradictory claims to exclusive truth. In fact, he argued, their ultimate commonality lay precisely in the fact of their disagreements. To put it another way, even as believing Jews and Christians are divided as to what exactly is the religious truth, they are at least united in the assurance that there is such a truth. That assurance, or what Rabbi Soloveitchik unapologetically referred to as each faith's "dogmatic certitudes," demands respect.

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Maria Johnson understands this, and her relationship with traditional Jewish families stands as a rebuke to the idea that warm relations between faiths requires surrendering one's exclusive claim to the truth. It is, she writes, "a difficult business to live in close proximity with people who are different; always has been, always will be." This is hardly an argument for renouncing the effort; on the contrary, "we have to learn to do it, or we may not make it into the next century." But Johnson enters a strong caution: even while engaging in this necessary enterprise, "we can't afford simply to jettison whatever convictions and commitments might clash with the convictions of others."

Johnson is quite matter-of-fact in acknowledging that her Jewish neighbors regard her as mistaken in her beliefs. Trying to guess what they tell their children about her and her Catholic family, she muses:

I'd imagine they say what I'd say to my [own] children if the nice family down the block were Mormons. I'd say, "They're great kids, and I'm really glad you're friends. You've probably noticed that they go to a funny church and they have some odd ideas about God. If they tell you stories about an angel called Moroni or somebody called Joseph Smith and some tablets, you can just tell them that we're Catholic and we don't believe in that. Don't argue with them; it's really important to them, and we don't want to hurt their feelings, but just between us, it's pretty silly."

One might quibble with Johnson's formulation, but her guess is a good one. Traditional Christians cannot conceive of God as Mormons do: a God who has a wife, who invites other human beings to become gods with him. Analogously, neither can traditional Jews conceive of a

God who became man, a Supreme Being who claims to be a single God but is in fact triune, a Lawgiver who commanded a Torah only temporarily, in the expectation that it would ultimately be abrogated. If Christians see Mormonism as a dramatic deviation from a millennia-old, biblically-based faith, Jews see Christianity in the same light. The Church claims to be the legitimate fulfillment of Judaism—but, as Johnson admits, “at this point in history it would be foolish to expect Jews to take seriously our claim to be children of Abraham just like them. So I don’t.”

It is, indeed, precisely because Christianity’s roots are to be found in Judaism that Johnson finds herself so intrigued by her friends’ devoted observance of the halakha, Jewish religious law. After all, the subject of that law’s enduring legitimacy figures prominently in the New Testament, and this is an issue she has read about and studied for years. Then, too, many important Christian events are linked to the Jewish calendar and to Jewish festivals. But now she has been exposed to the law in all the minutiae of its daily observance: the scouring and scrubbing for Passover, the punctilious and complex Sabbath regulations, the kingdom of rules that is the kosher kitchen.

“Sometimes,” she writes candidly, “it looks plain nuts.” On the whole, though, this “strange vigilance about light-switches and spoons and the like” has brought her friends to a relationship with God that is unique. Even as they approach the Torah “with a deep sense of obligation, responsibility, and awe,” it is clear that

they also love it, deeply. They obey it because they love it, and they make time in crowded lives to read books and take classes and look for ways to hew more closely to the law, to shape their lives more minutely by its precepts, to be more authentically Jewish as they obey more intimately.

This love of and joy in the law are authentic, she concludes, and cannot be gainsaid.

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What, then, of Paul’s description of the law in the New Testament as a form of slavery—his insistence that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”? Johnson is honest enough to wrestle with that, too. Experiencing her neighbors’ joy in observance, she says, has changed the way

she thinks of those Jews in ancient times who resisted the message of Christianity:

I love and admire Peter and Paul and James for their fearless, selfless, openhearted trust [in Jesus]. But I have also come to appreciate the determination and fidelity of the Jews who held out, disputed with Paul and Barnabas, and rejected their messages of a new covenant—they are the ancestors of my neighbors, the people who have kept Judaism alive.

Not only that, but Johnson has also “learned to sympathize” with those early Christians who held, contrary to Paul, that non-Jews wishing to join the Church should first be required to observe the law of the Torah, beginning with circumcision. “I used to think of” these conservative types, she writes,

as grouchy, unimaginative sticks-in-the-mud, but now I see them as motivated by the deep love for Torah that characterizes the lives of my friends. I can understand their horror at the idea that Gentiles should be accepted as worshipers of God without being required to keep God’s holy Law in its entirety.

In fact, Johnson suggests, it was precisely in response to this issue that Paul was writing when he condemned the law as a form of slavery. On the one hand, Johnson contends, Paul was deeply disturbed that Gentiles should be “argued or bullied into thinking that . . . before they could be Christians, they had to be Jews.” At the same time, however, he shared the concerns of those same “sticks-in-the-mud” with their love of Torah:

I can feel, acutely, Paul’s anguish as he watches Israel and the Church inexorably pull apart, forget their deep kinship, and prepare to forge separate paths through history. I know what that history is going to be like.

This, however, brings me to my one main disagreement with Johnson’s eloquent book. Reading Christian Scripture, I find it impossible to believe that Paul retained any admiration of observant Jewish life. In his writings, one finds little love of the law, little delight in its commandments and obligations, and little grief over the fact that the church and the synagogue have gone their separate ways. Indeed, in addressing Gentiles contemplating observance of the Torah, he deliberately includes himself—a born Jew—in his statement that “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law.” Paul declares: “the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that

we might be justified by faith; but after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster."

Never does Paul, or anyone else in Christian scripture, rejoice in the Torah or in the life lived according to its tenets. That may have something to do with the fact that, many centuries later, so thoughtful and learned a modern Christian as C.S. Lewis could express genuinely deep puzzlement over these thrilling words of David in the Psalms:

The law of the Lord is an undefiled law, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, and gives wisdom unto the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, and rejoice the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, and gives light unto the eyes. . . . More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey, and the honeycomb.

Lewis admitted to finding these words "very mysterious." Although he appreciated "that a man can, and must, respect these 'statutes,' and try to obey them, and assent to them in his heart," he failed to see "how they could be, so to speak, delicious, how they exhilarate." Attempting to work out the puzzle, Lewis ultimately suggested that this ancient exhilaration in the law must have been an artifact of circumstance. Biblical Jews, he speculated, "had as their immediate neighbors, close to them in race as well as in position, pagans of the worst kind, pagans whose religion was marked by none of that beauty or (sometimes) wisdom which we can find among the Greeks." Thus, when a biblical Jew thought of such idolatrous practices as "sacred prostitution, sacred sodomy, and the babies thrown into the fire for Moloch, his own 'Law' must [by contrast] have shone with an extraordinary radiance."

Lewis's implication, of course, is that with the change in circumstance wrought by the advent of Christianity, the law lost not only its justification but also much of its savor. Maria Johnson, for her part, knows that this was not and is not the case; in fact, she waxes rhapsodic over the degree to which her own newfound understanding of Judaism has *enhanced* her Christianity:

It seems to me quite impossible that the Church should live its life, baptize, and break bread, and that believers should be filled with the Spirit, in a world in which there were no Jews keeping kosher, welcoming *shabbos*, and learning Torah.

These are noble sentiments. But I still see no basis for believing that Paul felt the same way. If

he had, and if he had said so, history might have turned out differently.

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Although she has enjoyed learning about Judaism, Johnson, honest to the end, knows that longing for a life of observance violates the tenets of her faith. There are times, she says, “when I am half a Judaizer myself”—but then she remembers Paul’s words, and reminds herself that “Judaism and Christianity are separate religions now.” For all her admiration of the Jewish way of life, moreover, Johnson is unyielding in her belief that her own religion will be proved correct in the end of time, and that her neighbors will become, in effect, Jews for Jesus. “I’ll go on proclaiming that Christ *will* come again,” she writes; and when that happens, “my neighbors will greet him as their own.”

Many Jews today would no doubt be offended by such a statement. We live at a moment, after all, that is haunted by the violent specter of religious extremism in the form of radical Islam, and “dogmatic certitudes” of any kind are widely regarded as not just benighted but downright dangerous. It is a moment of stark antinomies, a moment when Thomas Friedman and David Hartman would have us choose between a benignly indifferent brand of “pluralism,” on the one hand, and the Taliban on the other.

One is tempted to characterize such wholesale condemnations as dogmatic certitudes in their own right. Lost in them is the distinction, central to democratic life, between believing what one believes and acting to impose that belief on others. Such impositions can themselves take many forms, from forcible coercion to the demand that people repudiate elements of their creed that are “offensive” to enlightened taste.

This demand is unacceptable. In a society like ours, in which the hard-won rules of civility can be assumed to operate, it remains “both impertinent and unwise,” as Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote four decades ago, “for an outsider to intrude upon . . . the way in which a faith community expresses its relationship to God.” He also added a word of still-useful advice: “non-interference with and non-involvement in something which is totally alien to us is a *conditio sine qua non* for the furtherance of good will and mutual respect.” To act otherwise is not only to misunderstand the nature of religion but harmful to both interfaith relations and democratic decorum.

*Strangers and Neighbors* helps remind us of this truth. Maria Johnson leaves no doubt that her admiration of Orthodox Judaism is motivated first and foremost by something that continues to amaze her—the fact, namely, that Jews have thought the Torah true enough to cling to it under every imaginable circumstance. “It defies all conceivable logic,” she writes,

that a tiny nation like Israel should have survived, while civilizations and empires have arisen, triumphed, and crumbled into oblivion. But in defiance of logic, here they are, a blessing to the nations and a blessing to me.

She, for her part, is a blessing to the Jews, and does honor to the cause of religious understanding in a democracy.

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### **About the Author**

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### **Footnotes**

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# Commentary

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