

# Jewish Attitude to the 'Other'

## Hearing the cry of our neighbors

Lawrence H. Schiffman serves on the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) as a representative of the Orthodox Union and he is also the past chair of that committee. He recently addressed the attendees of the 23rd bi-annual meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC) in Warsaw, Poland. The following is the edited text of his speech.

By LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

Judaism represents a unique combination of universalism and particularism. The balancing of these two tendencies provides a creative tension between the con-

### FIRST PERSON

cept that all humans are created in the image of God, and the attitudes and obligations that flow from it, and the belief in the special nature of

the Jewish people, often badly labeled as the “chosen people motif” or as the “election of Israel.” These ideas, therefore, are often balanced by explaining that the Jewish people are an extended family. One is closest to one’s nuclear family, then to wider relatives, then to fellow Jews, and then to the rest of humanity. The trick for the Jew in any specific time and place, and any specific situation, will be to determine the correct balance. This will be especially important in determining how to balance charitable obligations between helping fellow Jews and citizens of the world at large.

Besides being guided by a theoretical framework, the Jewish attitude to the “other” throughout the ages has been molded to a great extent by the character of the peoples with whom Jews lived, their religious ideas, and the manner in which they treated individual Jews and the Jewish people as a whole. It

is possible to trace a history of Jewish responses beginning with extremely negative views of Greco-Roman pagans, moving towards



Professor Lawrence Schiffman with Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

more generous evaluations of medieval Christians and Moslems, still greatly affected by the anti-Jewish

Semitic beliefs and behavior of those groups, through the modern period in which we are all familiar with the many tremendous improve-

ments in Jewish-non-Jewish relations, albeit to a great extent in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

The Mishnah, completed c. 200 CE, teaches us that all humans were created from one, Adam, to teach us that essentially one life is an entire potential world. Each of us was created in the image of God. Therefore, all of us humans have the potential of attaining sanctity. For the rabbis of the Talmud, non-Jews who lived according to the seven Noachide laws were entitled to a place in the scheme of salvation, which in Jewish belief was in no way limited to Jews. It is important to stress that Judaism never saw conversion to it as an obligation of those not born Jews. It understood life after death in the next world to be available to all those who lived a righteous life — Jewish or non-Jewish. Yet a special place in the divine economy was reserved for the Jews who are believed to be in a special bi-directional covenantal relationship with God. These concepts, sketched only briefly here, go hand-in-hand with the social and sociological side, and both together are enshrined in Jewish belief and law. How Jews relate to others, and especially to the suffering of others, such as today’s refugees, will be decided based on both the conceptual framework outlined above as well as to some extent on pragmatic considerations that could be termed the public policy of the Jewish people.

Of special importance in this discussion is the biblical concept of the *ger*, the stranger. This term is used in numerous ways in the Hebrew Bible. A stranger may refer to one from outside of Israelite society, in bibli-

cal times a non-Israelite. Usually, this term refers to somebody who comes from outside the geographical or cultural group and who, therefore, living among the people of Israel does not have rights of landed property, marriage, participation in sacrificial worship and equal judicial status. These people are termed in English “resident aliens.” The people of Israel are often pictured as “strangers” in foreign lands, such as during their sojourn in Egypt. Accordingly, Deuteronomy calls on the Jewish people to provide for the stranger, along with orphans and widows, and mandates providing them food and clothing. Further, Israelites are expected to love the stranger. They are to treat him or her in the same manner as God treats Israel. Essentially, then, the *gerim*, “the strangers,” represent a disenfranchised and poor class who are to be helped and supported (Deut. 10:18-19, etc.).

The rabbis had trouble understanding the various passages referring to strangers. They sorted out the uses of the word *ger* by understanding the Bible to refer to three types of people: the first was the foreigner, the sojourner, the outsider. This person was assumed to be someone who is not a member of the Jewish people and who lives according to idolatrous ways, although living in the context of a Jewish society. Such people are those who are generally denied the privileges mentioned above. The second type of *ger* is the *ger toshav*, best translated as “resident alien,” but denoting non-Jewish residents of Jewish society who observe the seven Noachide laws, the Jewish equivalent of natural law. The third type of *ger* in rabbinic biblical interpretation is the proselyte (that is, convert), and this term often translates Hebrew *ger* in the Septuagint. From this usage comes the modern Hebrew usage *gerut* for conversion to Judaism.

Accordingly, Judaism initially distinguished two kinds of non-Jews who might dwell among the Jews: one, a non-Jew who was an idolater, who did not have full rights within the society; and a second, the “resident alien,” a believer in God and the divine moral code who received the full rights of the society as well as some religious rights as well. Such people are welcomed in Jewish society in the Land of Israel. The same should be and imperfectly is the case, despite some recent unfortunate remarks, in the State of

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attempt to exterminate them, putting Jews on guard for anti-Semitic sentiments among the non-Jewish neighbors in the ancient world.

In the Second Temple period, some Jews became more particularistic while others gravitated more to the universalistic. It is perhaps easiest to deal with the universalists. There were certainly some Hellenistic Jews who so much wanted to be part of the wider society that they totally integrated into it. But more important for us are those whom we term “moderately Hellenized Jews,” such as those that Paul on his journeys encountered and such as the mainstream of the Egyptian Jewish community in which Philo Judaeus served as a leader and an intellectual. For such Jews, participation in wider communal and civic functions with their non-Jewish neighbors was natural. We assume that the attitude of such Jews to non-Jews must have been one of mutuality and that the charitable pattern of such Jews would have included helping their non-Jewish neighbors.

There is no question that the attitude of openness to “the other” deteriorated among the various Jewish groups in and outside the Land of Israel during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. This took place among some because of the increase in apocalyptic messianism that in some cases assumed that only Jews would share in the messianic era. This attitude is found in some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. But even among other Jews, the suffering inflicted on the Jewish people first by the Hellenistic rulers, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, and then by the Romans, left its mark. The persecutions under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, leading to the Maccabean Revolt, the brutality connected with the Roman suppression of the Great Revolt, and the Hadrianic persecutions in the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba Revolt, especially the prohibition of Jewish practices, were so cruel as to leave permanent scars that were only surpassed by the Holocaust.

Despite the relative moderation of the Pharisees and their successors the Talmudic rabbis, the memory of these events was still an influence. The rabbis remained surprisingly open and tolerant despite the experiences of the latter half of the Second Temple period. By this time the *halakhic* (Jewish law) definitions became very important. Large number of social service activities — what Americans call “the safety net” — were extended to all non-Jews, including healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and even comforting mourners. These actions are

described as *mi-pene darkhe shalom*, “for reasons of peace.” On the other hand, the low opinion of idolators included the assumption of the lowest levels of immorality on the part of Greco-Roman non-Jews.

Early Christianity posed a specific challenge here. The New Testament testifies to numerous inner Jewish disputes between the Pharisees and the earliest followers of Jesus. Many of these were about fundamental Jewish concepts and practices. However, by the time we reach the Gospel of John, the New Testament account has replaced the Pharisees with “the Jews” as a whole, and we hear also that Christians have been placed *apostogogos*, “outside of the synagogue,” in my view by means of the benediction against the *minim*, liter-

in the true God and follows the basic moral code.

How do these basic principles “other” relate to the present-day refugee crisis? A quick look at the sources that underlie the discussion above as well as other available Jewish sources would seem to argue that, in the absence of other mitigating factors or security considerations, Jews should be supporting and accepting refugees from natural or military catastrophes. Further, the description of the religious traditions of the refugees so as to place them in the status of the “resident alien,” should argue for a policy of openness and welcome to refugees.

Needless to say this is an ex-

become new Christians and those who did feign embracing Catholicism were pursued and persecuted for continued adherence to the Jewish faith, causing many of them to flee. Pogroms in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century sent many more Jews fleeing, and they joined the enormous numbers of Jews who sought, for economic reasons, to find a new home in the United States and Canada. Large numbers of Jewish refugees were created by the events of World War I but no greater refugee crisis could possibly occur for the Jewish people than the aftermath of the Holocaust, when the gates of the Land of Israel were kept closed by the British government and when so few countries were willing to admit large numbers of those Jewish

service and religious organizations have never stopped helping refugees, Jewish or non-Jewish; Christian or Moslem. While Israel today grapples only imperfectly with some of the refugees that have been smuggled into it through the desert, it does so understanding the age-old responsibility that it has to the stranger — especially if he or she is a refugee.

We would not be totally honest if we did not admit here to two essential limitations. Jewish law would require that if responsible authorities, not demagogues, were to tell us that the admission of a specific individual or individuals was in fact dangerous, it would be our responsibility not to welcome them. Such decisions would have to be specific and not involve collective religious discrimination. Further, we must return here to the balance of universality and particularism that we spoke of earlier. Jewish teaching would call upon us to balance donations and actual physical help for refugees against the needs of the Jewish community and the State of Israel. These decisions are often difficult and need to be made by each individual, hopefully in accord with Jewish ethics. We must also note that accepting refugees may not be the only solution to the problem that these people face. Reversing the terrible circumstances from which they flee, thus making it possible for them to remain in or return to their homes, may often be a more humane solution to the problem. There is one bottom line, however. People who are starving or in danger must always be helped.

It will certainly turn out at this meeting that there will be differences of opinion between Judaism and Catholicism; between the Jews and the Catholics who are here; between Catholics and Catholics; and between Jews and Jews. Hopefully, these disagreements will not be about our constant obligation to help our fellow humans in whatever misfortune they may find themselves. Rather, our disagreements will be about how much we have to help, specifically how to help, and how to teach our communities to better join in this effort. What greater achievement can there be for us as two independent faith communities striving together to fulfill the vision of the prophets.

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Members of the group, including Professor Lawrence Schiffman (center), guided by Marian Turski (right), Chairman of the Board, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

ally “heretics,” clearly referring here to Jewish Christians. Several rabbinic restrictions can be explained as intending to define Christianity as the other. I have explained this development as resulting from the change-over of the nature of the Christian community in the Land of Israel from the earliest Jewish Christians to Gentile Christians. However, the point that I wish to make here is that rabbinic authorities during the period in which the Jewish-Christian schism was actually unfolding saw Christianity as an incipient organizational “other.” Despite the sharpening of fundamental disagreements that took place in the aftermath of the Pauline Epistles and with the large-scale spreading of Christianity, we find Jews continuing to behave towards Christians in accord with the *halakhic* requirements and continuing to see them in the category of the “resident alien” who believes

tremely important issue for the Jewish people who have a history of being in large measure refugees. During the First Temple period, Jews were exiled by Assyria and Babylonia as these empires attempted to conquer the known world. The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE in the Jewish revolt against Rome (66-73 CE), left widespread destruction in the Land of Israel, causing many Jews to relocate to other places in the Greco-Roman world and even to Europe and Babylonia. In the Middle Ages, large numbers of Jews were forced to flee in the face of the Rhineland massacres perpetrated in connection with the Crusades. Shortly after, the whole of Western Europe expelled its Jews, sending many of them into the fledgling East European Jewish community. In the fifteenth century Jews were forced to flee Spain and Portugal if they did not want to

refugees who had survived the horrors of the death camps. No sooner did the State of Israel come into being, accepting all Jewish refugees, than virtually all the Arab nations expelled their Jews en masse, sending them either to Israel, the U.S. or Europe. In our own day, Jews denied their religious and political rights left the Soviet Union seeking freedom, primarily in Israel and the United States, but elsewhere as well.

There is no people that has seen among its own the numbers of refugees experienced by the Jews throughout history. No one knows better from sad experience the meaning of the commandment, “Do not oppress the stranger” (Exod. 23:9), for, as the verse continues, “for you know the feelings of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” This is why Jewish organizations designed to aid refugees and other Jewish social

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Israel. The Jewish vision of both the present age and the End of Days does not entail a prohibition of non-Jews living in the Land of Israel. Indeed, Isaiah (2:3) prophesies that the nations of the world will come up to worship God in Jerusalem at the end of days. The Bible and later Jewish texts, however, do call for the elimination of idolatry.

Later in history, when a minority of Jews lived among a Christian or Muslim majority, the status of “resident alien” has been attributed by some Jewish *halakhic* (legal) authorities, especially in the modern period, to members of these two religions because of their belief in God. Moslems were seen as adhering to pure monotheistic beliefs. However, the situation with Christianity was seen as more complicated because of the theological differences with Judaism surrounding the Trinity. The Tosafist legists, medieval Franco-German scholars, ruled that although Jews were obligated to believe in absolute monotheism, non-Jews who believed in the true God but who

associated Him with other divine or quasi-divine beings were considered to fulfill the requirement of belief in God necessary for this status. Accordingly, the Tosafists decided that Christianity was included in this category and Christians were treated as monotheists. This meant that all kinds of



**Catholic and Jewish representatives in front of Poland's monument to the Treblinka death camp.**

restrictions regarding idolaters did not apply to Christians, making possible normal friendly relations, despite the periodic anti-Semitic outbursts often led by some preachers. All this opened up to Jews the obligation to love their non-Jewish

neighbors, to provide support and succor to them in times of crisis, to support them charitably and to establish neighborly relations. Such an attitude was lacking in Greco-Roman times when the neighbors of the Jews neither believed in the one true God nor practiced biblical morality. The medieval Talmudic

authority and commentator Menahem ha-Meiri went further, extending the status of “resident alien” to all societies ruled by a legal system of fairness and justice.

over the centrality of Israel to God's plan for the world. The people of Israel is descended from forefathers, each selected by God in order to convey His revealed word to humanity. These particularistic beliefs in no way detracted from the universalistic commitments and from the understanding that all human beings are created in God's image. The Table of Nations of Genesis certainly made the point that we would refer to as the brotherhood of all humanity. This was all despite the fact that the Hebrew Bible was totally intolerant of idolatry and of those who performed it — whether Israelites or “others.”

Thus far we have been talking about fundamental beliefs and practices reflected in the Jewish legal system. However, as is the case virtually always, historical factors also had their influence. There have been extensive developments in Jewish interaction with “the other” throughout history. We will see that to some extent the application of the above principles has been modulated by two factors: (1) the closeness of the specific “others” to the Jewish ideal of Sons of Noah, in terms of both belief in God and ethics and morality; and (2) the

attitude and comportment of those non-Jews in dealing with Jews. This second factor might be stated more simply as the extent of anti-Semitism of those “others.”

Let us take a historical look at the period of the Hebrew Bible. The initial conquest was supposed to remove the practitioners of polytheistic, pagan religion. While this plan raises some serious moral questions, it is clear from the subsequent biblical accounts that early Israel lived among Canaanites who were never destroyed. Yet the Bible saw them as depraved in their religious practices and primitive in their theology. But this was never the entire story. When we look at the prophets, we see the tension I talked about. Isaiah's visions of universalistic redemption saw the potential sanctity in the nations who would come to accept God's sovereignty. All the nations would share in the *Eschaton*, the coming end of days. Yet at the same time, Ezekiel assumed, followed by the Dead Sea War Scroll and some other Second Temple, post-Hebrew Bible Jewish literature that some evil nations surrounding Israel would have to be destroyed at the end of days. Further, the book of Esther reported on what Jews saw as the first

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