A PHILOSOPHICAL

SALVO

on

WHAT CHRISTIANS TEND TO GET WRONG ABOUT

JEWS

WHAT JEWS TEND TO GET WRONG ABOUT

CHRISTIANS

AND WHAT CAN BE

DONE...

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INTRODUCTION

The right place to begin a pamphlet like this may be by asking why a conversation about our mutual misunderstandings is worthwhile. After all, why be so negative? Two thousand years of tragic failures of communication have been quite enough, and now, several decades into a radically new story of Jewish-Christian engagement, we should be more optimistic, more affirming, more encouraging. Yet I've chosen to focus here on the misunderstandings between us, as a productive way to deal with some of the questions that have come up again and again as Christians and Jews have sought to work with, talk with, and befriend each other.

These include:

- *Why do Christians often find the Jews with whom they are in conversation to be not all that passionate about matters of faith or of biblical interpretation?*
- *Aren't Jews concerned about their salvation?*
- *What is the role of issues of faith and law in Jewish-Christian relations?*
- *Why does Israel matter so much?*
- *What about Messianic Jews? How do they fit into Jewish-Christian relations?*

I write as a modern Orthodox Jew who has had enjoyed many rather unorthodox years of study, teaching and engagement with Christians: an interest and specialization that's quite out of the

ordinary in my Jewish environment. It's those years of experience, together with a close understanding of my own Jewish culture and community, that I draw on to address some of the major areas where Jews and Christians don't easily understand one another. Without much effort, this booklet could have been twice as long. There are many more issues to discuss.

Before we begin, a word of caution: Unquestionably one of the most important mutual misunderstandings between Jews and Christians concerns the inability of each side to see and respect the diversity that makes up the other's community. It is a tempting but dangerous fallacy to think that all Jews or Christians are pretty much

like all other Jews or Christians. We often know far too little about the variety that exists within each faith. There's even a tendency for us to decide what strikes us as "acceptable" within the other tradition. I've heard Christians say that Reform Jews "aren't real Jews." I've heard Jews say that Catholics "aren't real Christians." These misunderstandings can have serious effects on our ability to engage with one another.

I very much hope that this short booklet does not serve to strengthen the temptation for those in one of these faiths to engage only a small segment of the other.

Nevertheless, I write as an Orthodox Jew, however modern. And the form of Christianity

which I primarily address here is conservative Evangelicalism. No doubt others will be better equipped to examine additional aspects of this quest for better understanding between Jews and Christians; my hope is that this will provide a good start, and kick off some robust Jewish-Christian conversation for readers.

The Big Picture

When planning this booklet, I had originally intended to separate the major misunderstandings between Jews and Christians into two distinct categories. I envisioned one tidy section of religious and theological issues, and another dedicated to sociological and historical issues. But

it turned out that this distinction is precisely part of the problem.

Simply put, the basic Christian "problem" with Judaism is a theological one, whereas the core Jewish "problem" with Christianity is a sociological one.

Broadly speaking, the most basic Christian puzzle about Judaism centers on how to understand the ongoing significance (if any) of God's chosen people in this age of the new covenant. Christianity must, in one way or another, address the question of its Jewish roots and their significance, and engage the major identity question of its own continuity or discontinuity from those roots. This question

receives a rather sharp edge by virtue of the overwhelming fact that both two thousand years ago and today, most Jews do not see anything special in Jesus' nature or ascribe any metaphysical significance to his crucifixion.

On the other hand, the Jewish issue with Christianity is by and large not theological. Judaism as a religion has no essential need to enter into the theological claims of Christianity in order to assert and make sense of its own identity. Aside from *possibly* engaging the question of why it is that Gentiles of any stripe can possess so much power (for Jews, this is obviously related to the question of how to square the historical suffering of the Jews with being God's chosen

people), the Jewish problem with Christianity is not centered on abstract philosophical questions, despite their major theological differences.

There are several reasons for this. The most fundamental of these is the fact that Jewish tradition has no expectation that non-Jews should worship or observe God's will *in the same way* as do Jews. Certainly Judaism does have something to say about how non-Jews should practice, most commonly articulated in the form of the Noahide Laws. And naturally, the degree to which Christianity conforms or does not conform to the Jewish ideal of Gentile observance is an entirely different question. Still, this basic point remains.

A second reason can be found in the fact that especially since the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE, for the last 2000 years, Jews have mostly been turned inward and focused on ourselves, our own obligations and our own survival.

Thus, for both theological and socio-historical reasons, Jews and Judaism really do not tend to actively say much about how non-Jews should practice in any kind of assertive way. Unlike the universal emphasis of Christianity and its vision of a Church with an identity "in Christ" conceived beyond ethnicity, Judaism tends to be overwhelmingly focused on Jews. Almost all of the commandments are directed to Jews, not

Gentiles. And while there is certainly a universal interest and even ultimate mission in Judaism, it is far more particularistic and ethnic in focus. Jews have no self-understood obligation to evangelize the world, and no sense that the world needs to become Jewish. Jewish attitudes toward Christianity tend to be focused on Christians themselves: their actions, and the implications of those actions for Jewish cultural and physical survival.

The obvious bears emphasizing: Jews have a great deal of serious theological *difference* with Christians, but that difference doesn't have significant impact on our ability to form alliances, at least in the modern world. The things that

influence and shape the Jewish ability to work with Christians are overwhelmingly problems of history and sociology.

Who is a Jew? Who is a Christian?

This first distinction is the most fundamental, and affects many of the issues that follow: how does each community understand belonging? It's crucial to address this. What makes you a Christian? What makes you a Jew? The answers to these questions are so different that they color the entire conversation yet they do so in ways so deep that we often fail to perceive their impact.

When I ask an evangelical Christian what makes him or her a Christian, I get a variety of responses. Usually, though, the discussion focuses around a single moment when they "invited Jesus to be Lord of their life" or were "born again." Many evangelical Christians can point to the date that this occurred, and the question "When did you become a Christian?" is thus a completely reasonable one to ask, the answer constituting as it does a kind of "spiritual birthday." There are critical elements of both intellectual assent and of choice. "Accepting Christ" is what makes one a Christian. In Christian theology, this is a moment of adoption: one is adopted into God's family, and into Abraham's lineage. It is a moment of entry

into a covenant with God. It is also understood to be a moment of supernatural transformation in which one becomes a "new creation." Different expressions of Christianity, of course, understand this somewhat differently, especially the way in which such a moment is related to the practice of baptism.

For Jews, there is no such moment. Jews are Jews because they are born of Jewish mothers (some would argue fathers also.). There's no assent or agreement needed, and there's no question of adoption into anything. You are Jewish whether you want to be or not. A Jew is one by inheritance, by birth. You might like it, hate it, reject it, run away from it, but according to

Judaism, you simply are and there is nothing you can do to forfeit that status. Of course, there are those few who convert to Judaism, through a prescribed process. Interestingly enough these "Jews by choice" take on the ethnic lineage of Jewishness, becoming ritually a daughter or son of Abraham and Sarah.

It's easier to think of Christianity as a religion and Jewishness as an ethnicity. This is what makes it possible to be an atheist Jew or a Buddhist Jew, combinations that can seem contradictory or senseless to many Christians.

Especially as a result of anti-semitism, and the difficulties that come with being Jewish, Jews have often desired to blend into larger society and

to lose these disabilities. Jewishness, however, is something a Jew might seek to avoid, but ultimately can't escape. There are two reasons for this: first, because Judaism will always claim him as a Jew, regardless of what he might believe or how he might act. Second, because the rest of the world has tended to do the same. A well-worn Jewish joke expresses this well:

A hunchback and a Jew who had converted to Christianity pass a synagogue. The convert says, "You know, I used to be a Jew." The hunchback says, "Interesting. And I used to be a hunchback."

In many ways, when we think about Jews and Christians we are comparing two quite different things. Christians by definition assent to

certain doctrines and share certain core beliefs. Christianity has tended to define itself against heresy, and to form schisms, along precisely doctrinal lines, such as how to understand the relationship of Jesus' humanity to his divinity, how the Holy Spirit works with other members of the Trinity, and whether election is conditional or unconditional.

Jews however do not necessarily agree to particular doctrines or beliefs. Their religious beliefs might in practice be quite antithetical to those of classical Judaism. They might be atheists, agnostics, Hindus or even followers of Jesus (more on that later). But they are still always Jews. In this sense, it might be more helpful to think of

Judaism more in terms of Jewishness – as an ethnicity that sometimes is expressed in what we think of as religious ways.

This means that Christians are often surprised by Jews who believe some rather "un-Jewish" kinds of things. Equally, Jews are often surprised by the fact that so many Christians are such devout and committed believers.

Once we understand Jewishness more as an ethnic heritage that one is born into and less like a set of religious beliefs that one assents to, it makes it easier to understand Jews who might not share the biblical values, knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, or commitment to the practice of their own faith that an Evangelical might expect.

Jesus

Many Jews who are involved in interfaith dialogue seem to want to believe that the differences between Judaism and Christianity are a question of detail. Particularly for those who believe that Jewish-Christian relations should be focused on highlighting our common ground—a priority I do not share—it's very tempting to make it sound as though Jews and Christians have the same God, but Christians add this Jesus bit as a kind of tag-on. But, for Christians, Jesus is no tag-on. Jews have serious trouble understanding that Christians truly believe that Jesus is, in a very deep sense, God. There is no Christian "God"

apart from Jesus, no matter how mysteriously that all works. Jesus is not peripheral, but central. Not an addition, or an afterthought, but the core and essence of Christian identity. He is, Christians believe, both God and the long-awaited Messiah, and Christians often have serious trouble understanding how Jews—particularly Jews who know their Bible—cannot see this "obvious" truth. But of course, how we read our respective Bibles takes us to some very different conclusions.

The Bible and sources of authority

There are several ways that the Bible serves as an occasion for Jews and Christians to misunderstand one another. The first is

deceptively simple, but has far-reaching implications: what constitutes the Bible?

Jews don't even really use the word Bible, but prefer “Tanakh”, an acronym for Torah, Nevi'im and Ktuvim – that is, the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings. We are *especially* uncomfortable with those who call it the Old Testament, with all the connotations of obsolescence and irrelevance that this seems to imply, together with the assumption of something else of the same kind that is “new.” But for the sake of clarity, and in accordance with common scholarly usage, let's call it the Hebrew Bible.

The Jewish Bible, obviously, doesn't include the New Testament. This, of course, has many

deep-level implications. One of these is that Jews don't perceive themselves to be under any obligation to seriously engage the gospels, the other New Testament writings, and the various claims about Jesus' nature that are contained in them, because this literature is simply not part of our canon. When Christians sometimes ask why Jews don't see what might seem to them to be obvious references to Jesus in the Hebrew Bible, the most basic plausible answer is something along the lines of “Jesus who?” as the Jesus attested to in the New Testament forms no part of Jewish scripture or tradition.

At least as important is the fact that the role of our Bibles is different. This difference is

particularly pronounced when it comes to Evangelical-Jewish relations. The Protestant ideal of *sola scriptura* really has no analogue in Judaism. Christians who do not understand the role of the rabbinic tradition in shaping post-Second Temple Judaism may be confused by what they perceive to be a disconnection between the Israelite religion they encounter in the Hebrew Bible and the contemporary Jewish practices they see around them. This can lead to disappointment in what seems to be the Jewish reliance on human authority, which Evangelical Christians believe to be non-authoritative, even dangerous. (Of course, the way that Orthodox Christians or Roman Catholics would think about this issue is

somewhat different, similarly indebted as they are to an authorized reading tradition.)

Judaism is deeply indebted to and grounded in the Hebrew Bible, but it is not bound by it. There is effectively no Judaism any longer that exists apart from what we call the oral law– that is, the supplements to and interpretations of the Torah that rabbinic tradition holds were delivered at the same time as the written law, plus interpretations and commentaries on both written and oral law. These are contained in the Mishna and the Gemara, respectively; together, the two bodies of writing constitute the Talmud. It would not be extreme to say that what really defines Judaism is an acceptance of this (now written)

“oral tradition” as the authoritative interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish life.

It’s not just that “faithful” Jews (the term grates on the Jewish ear, for reasons that will be explained below) would give the Bible a more prominent role than would “liberal” Jews, in the way that “faithful” evangelical Christians like to think of themselves vis-a-vis “liberal” Christians. It’s that the Bible simply doesn’t play the same role for observant Jews as it does for evangelical Christians. Mastery of Jewish religious literature is measured in one’s familiarity with the rabbinic texts-- in Talmud, not in Torah.

It is not out at all out of the ordinary for an evangelical Protestant to be more familiar with

the Hebrew Bible—particularly the Prophets—than is an Orthodox Jewish rabbi. And Orthodox Jews constitute a small minority of Jews, in both America and Israel. Most Jews are less likely to know the content of the Hebrew Bible, having a rather more liberal approach to scripture–and many other things–than do evangelical Christians.

So our Bibles are different, and the *roles* of our Bibles are different. But to make matters even more complicated, even where our Bibles overlap, we understand them quite differently. First, we read differently. As I've noted, there is very little room in Judaism for simply cracking open the text and reading its "plain meaning." Traditional Jews read through the eyes of generations of rabbis and

authoritative interpreters. Even more important, the New Testament invariably colors how Christians read the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish and Christian readings of the story of Abraham (Genesis 12-23) for example, are quite different. Christians understand the story through critical theological filters such as Romans 4, and Jews do not; this leads to two very different morals to the Abrahamic story. It is likewise impossible for Christians to read Isaiah 53 without perceiving there prophecies which they believe are fulfilled by Jesus. So we might say that our Bibles are different, the role of our Bibles is different, and how we read even the scripture we share is often quite different.

Salvation

Another major area of misunderstanding between Jews and Christians surrounds the notion of salvation. Here again, we seem to be speaking different languages.

The Christian concern with salvation is central to the faith. How is it achieved? How does one know that one is saved? Is it possible to know? These questions have split Christian movements and then splintered them again, as different theological traditions have come to different answers. Jews don't understand the Christian "obsession" with this issue, whereas Evangelical

Christians don't understand how Jews can sleep at night without answers to these questions.

Naturally related to this is the question of the role of "the Law"-- we would say "the mitzvot" or "commandments"-- that is, the 613 positive ("thou shalt") and negative ("thou shalt not") commands found in the Hebrew Bible and enumerated and categorized by such commentators and systematizers as the thirteenth-century scholar Moses Maimonides. The majority of non-Orthodox Jews today do not consider much of "the Law" to be binding or really even relevant to their lives, although this does not, of course, mean that ethical behavior is not a crucial part of how many non-Orthodox Jews seek

to practice their religion. A different kind of confusion comes when Evangelical Christians, with their commitment to *sola fide*, justification by faith alone, meet up with Orthodox Jews who are committed to Torah observance, or what Luther, following the Apostle Paul, might have called "the works of the Law."

Evangelical Christians believe that Jews both are, and also perceive themselves to be, under a burden of law, and that they are trying (futilely) to "earn their way into heaven" through the performance of works. That is, they think that Jews must feel themselves to be in the position that Luther felt himself to be before his spiritual crisis - wracked with anxiety about their own

salvation. But this is not the way that Jews think about their position. Jews don't view salvation as something to be earned in any sense. The Mishna states clearly: All Israel has a portion in the world to come. But beyond that, Jews are far more interested in sanctification—how to live a holy life in the here and now in line with God's commandments—than we are in speculating about matters of justification and salvation.

It is also important to add that not only is salvation *not* the goal of Torah observance, but also that the law is understood in Judaism not as a burden, but as a delight. The revelation of God's will of His commandments in His Torah is something for which we Jews are deeply grateful.

Could you imagine a God who had requests of His people but who did not communicate them? Obedience to God's will is simply the mark of our love for Him, the correct and grateful response of God's people to His outpouring of grace.

To believe and to practice

This brings us to another fundamental difference in emphasis. Christianity is, as I have noted above, a religion based on specific beliefs. The first few centuries of Christianity produced several creeds, as the Church sought to sort out the boundaries of orthodox Christian belief. The tendency to publish statements of belief continues in the modern period, as each denomination seeks

to articulate its specific doctrinal commitments. Christianity inherently involves adherence to a specific set of doctrines. What makes a particular kind of Christian is –at least in theory, and at least in part – adherence to an even more specific set of beliefs.

In contrast, Judaism has no official creed to which Jews must adhere. There no doctrine to which we must assent. Judaism is a religion focused on observance, on practice. So while there is a stream of Judaism called "Orthodox" Judaism, this is something of a misnomer. Rather than orthodoxy, Judaism has traditionally expected of its adherents what we can call "orthopraxy," that is, performance of correct practice. A good Jew is

not a Jew who believes certain things. A good Jew is a Jew who *does* (or refrains from doing) certain things. Being Jewish has traditionally included observance of the Sabbath, prayer, dietary laws, marital sexual ethics and more. And while it's certainly possible to tease out Jewish beliefs from our prayers and practices, there is no focus on accepting a set of propositions laid out in a creed.

This is by no means to suggest that Judaism has no beliefs. Classical Judaism has always held, explicitly or implicitly, core beliefs that include the existence and unity of God, His creation of the world and revelation of His will at Sinai, the existence of prophecy, and reward and punishment for human actions. The most famous

effort to articulate a Jewish creed is found in Maimonides' (1135-1204 CE) Thirteen Principles of Faith. But this and other creedal formulations in Judaism have no authoritative status. Judaism is a religion focused on right practice rather than on right belief.

This is where the term "faithful Jew" that people sometimes try to use as an analogue to "faithful Christian" really doesn't work. We use "observant Jew" instead, to denote a Jew who is committed to what is considered traditional Jewish practice of the commandments. And while Christians do use the phrase "faithful Christian" to mean one who is faithful to his or her commitment to follow Jesus in obedient action,

and has a personal relationship with Christ (be that through a born again experience or through the reception of the sacraments) there is always, in Christianity, a core emphasis on the need for right belief, and an emphasis on specific and clear creedal statements and propositions. Hence all the historical struggles to determine Christian orthodoxy and reject heretical beliefs.

The Holocaust and Israel

One issue that many Christians have difficulty in grasping is the Jewish feeling of profound vulnerability. Even to put it this way is an understatement. This is not just an intellectual issue to be apprehended, but is an existential

reality. The challenge for the Christian is to really comprehend and empathize with the deep, visceral, historical sense of being threatened that pervades the Jewish community. This is part of the burden of our history: while the situation of the Jewish community was at times more secure and at others more endangered, with very few exceptions Jews have been dependent on the rule and attitudes of others. Whether those others were the powers of ancient Babylonia and Rome, the Ottoman Empire and other Muslim political bodies, medieval European kingdoms, or the modern states of Europe or the Levant, Jewish history has been singularly marked by dependence

and vulnerability until the birth of the modern state of Israel.

But even within this context of this vulnerability, the Holocaust is unique. Following the murder of some two-thirds of European Jewry, Jewish leaders and thinkers struggled to articulate a sense of meaning and direction for a decimated community. Emil Fackenheim's famous "614th commandment," formulated as an addition to the classical 613, is based in the realization that the post-Shoah world is radically different than that which existed before the extermination of six million Jews. He wrote that

we are, first, commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. We are commanded, secondly, to remember in our very guts and bones the martyrs of the Holocaust, lest their memory perish. We are forbidden, thirdly, to deny or despair of God, however much we may have to contend with him or with belief in him, lest Judaism perish. We are forbidden, finally, to despair of the world as the place which is to become the kingdom of God, lest we help make it a meaningless place in which God is dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted. To abandon any of these imperatives, in response to Hitler's victory

at Auschwitz, would be to hand him yet other, posthumous victories.

Or in other words “thou shalt survive, as Jews: in body, in communal memory, and in spirit”. That imperative, the sense of communal responsibility to survive as a people runs deep.

Unsurprisingly, our history - marked by forced exiles, expulsions, the destruction of our communities, the Crusades, the Inquisition, dhimmitude, pogroms, and genocide that were facilitated by two thousand years of homelessness and dependence - tends to make Jews hyper-aware of threat, and quite ready to take individuals, nations and leaders absolutely

seriously when they articulate a desire to exterminate us. Because it's impossible for Jews to say "that could never happen" again.

This has profound implications for defining the things that matter most deeply to the Jewish community. Simply put, ensuring physical and cultural survival is paramount. That means that preserving the memory of the Holocaust is a central component of Jewish communal life, so that we don't lose track of the very difficult and uncomfortable truth that such threat does indeed exist. No matter how much we would like it to be otherwise, to be impossible, unthinkable, the fact is simply that there have long been, and there still

are, people who think a better world would be one without Jews in it.

Earlier we discussed differences in bases for group belonging. What makes one a Christian (adoption through faith) and what makes one a Jew (birth) are quite different. This has a great many implications for our ability to understand one another. One of them is that Jews don't use the word "Christian" the same way that Christians might use the word "Christian." For Jews, Christians are that group who is not Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and so on. We tend to think about religion generally as we think of our own Jewishness, in an ethnic sense – everyone has one, even if they don't practice it. So for Jews,

Christians are non-Jews who aren't something else; they are descendents of the Catholics and Orthodox and Protestants in Europe and elsewhere; they are those who have Christian parents. And this applies even if they aren't believers at all and perhaps wouldn't even use the label "Christian" themselves.

This is important for the topic at hand. When well-meaning Christians assert that the Nazis weren't Christians (which in a way is true), Jews hear whitewashing (which is also true). Those Christians are trying to assert that the Nazis weren't *real* Christians. But for Jews, it is obvious that those are people who were raised in a historically Christian country, had parents who

were Christians and in most cases publicly professed Christian creeds. To Jews, that makes them Christians.

Perhaps what they did means that their Christianity was in fact poisoned, or inauthentic. But for Jews, the Nazis were most assuredly Christian. And the Christian world has some explaining to do. The ease with which Christians think it impossible that people bearing the label Christian can do terrible things should be carefully reconsidered.

The issue of Israel is very much connected to this sense of vulnerability. For Jews, Israel as a Jewish homeland is not an ethnocentric issue. Nor is it a kind of "everyone else has a country so we

want one too." It's not a desire for isolation, or wish to keep others out. And it's not even primarily about a conviction that this land was promised to us by God. Our Jewish commitment to Israel as a Jewish homeland is primarily based on one simple, painful reality – we have no alternative. Golda Meir said that we Israelis had a secret weapon in our struggles with the Arab world – our secret was that we had nowhere else to go.

Many Christians miss how absolutely central Israel is for contemporary Jewish identity. And I don't mean a particular Israeli political party or orientation, but simply the fact that Israel is understood to be a non-negotiable, critical element in the survival of the Jewish people and

culture. It's not optional, it's not right-wing or left-wing, it's not a carefully weighted political opinion. It's simply our past and – even more important - it's our future. Because the Jew without Israel can all too easily end in a pile of ashes. We have nowhere else to go. And this is why Christian activists in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, in condemning and calling for an outright ban on any engagement with Israel, are effectively banning engagement with the Jewish world. Because Israel is non-negotiable for pretty much all of contemporary Jewry.

When some Christians criticize Jews for advocating on behalf of the existence and security

of the Jewish state, it sounds a little suspicious to our ears. After all, Israel is the first crack at independent, sovereign rule that Jews have had since Pompey the Great made Judea a Roman protectorate in 63 BCE. To hear that we should not have this chance, that we are being stubborn and excessively worried about our own survival, that we should be more willing to risk and to trust, and on top of that, that if we don't "behave" properly, well, they will support campaigns to boycott and divest from the Jewish state–– frankly, it all rings a little hollow. To Jewish understanding, Christians have had – at least since Constantine – their own cities, their own nations, their own empires. And these political bodies have served as

among the greatest threats to Jewish survival for much of the last 2000 years. And the way that accusations against Zionists are framed are also, to Jewish ears, unsettlingly reminiscent of older Christian tropes about Jewish ethnocentrism (versus Christian universalism) and error (rather than Christian enlightenment).

Evangelism & Messianic Jews

Another implication of this deeply-ingrained feeling of Jewish vulnerability is a very strong rejection of evangelism. By this I do not (just) mean a rejection of the message of the Christian "good news". That goes without saying. As we have already noted above, Jesus and the

cross solve no problem that actually exists in Jewish understanding.

Jews see in Christian evangelism a clear and unwelcome assertion that Judaism simply isn't as good as Christianity; that Judaism is insufficient, partial and deficient. At the same time it is extremely difficult for Jews to understand that evangelism does not actually stem from a conscious desire to harm the Jewish community.

Christians evangelize for different reasons, often several reasons at the same time - to save people from hellfire, to share the source of their own hope, because Jesus said to do so. Never have I met a Christian who evangelizes Jews in a conscious effort to wipe out or weaken the Jewish

community. Yet Jews see in evangelism exactly that: an effort to steal Jews away from Judaism and turn them into Christians. And while this might be an incomplete understanding of evangelism, there is a certain logic – if the project of evangelistic outreach to the Jews were to actually succeed, we would effectively have no more Jews and no more Judaism. Thus it is *absolutely impossible* for Jews to square expressions of love for the Jewish people and culture with participation in (or support for) evangelism. At a visceral level, this makes no sense to Jews, who see in evangelism only anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

This is related to, though distinct from, the Jewish attitude towards Messianic Judaism. It is

clear from looking at the Jewish community today that there is very little consensus on the matter of what constitutes "Jewishness" or acceptable Jewish practice. Contemporary Judaism is deeply divided on these matters. Yet despite this range of response to the question of what constitutes Jewishness, all four major streams of Judaism – Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist – agree that Messianic Jews are *not* acceptably practicing Judaism, and that Judaism is utterly incompatible with belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. This is, in fact, one of the few things that all four *do* agree on.

For Christians, this isn't always obvious, especially given what we have said above about

the Jewish "ethnic" understanding of religion. If Judaism is better thought of as an ethnicity that one is born into than as a set of religious beliefs to which a person agrees, and if the Jewish community does not revoke the Jewishness of those who proclaim atheism or Buddhism, then why are Messianic Jews such a problem?

There are a complex set of reasons for this. One of them most certainly is the perception on the part of all four groups that any large-scale embrace of Jesus by Jews is ultimately and unavoidably an act of ethno-cultural suicide. Jews understand that Jewish identity is extremely difficult to maintain under even normal circumstances in the modern world. To try to

maintain a Jewish identity while at the same time participating in the religion of the Christian majority seems an impossible vision for cultural survival. And while Messianic Jews believe themselves to be specifically maintaining their Jewish identities – both cultural and religious – together with belief in Jesus, it is very difficult for Jews to see Messianic Judaism as something other than a kind of syncretism.

Christians often find the unabashed and complete mainstream Jewish rejection of Messianic Jews to be both puzzling and offensive. Yet while belief in Jesus as the Messiah might be acceptable for non-Jews, non-Messianic Jews maintain that it is absolutely impossible for Jews,

both on theological and socio-historical bases. It is worth noting that along the lines discussed above, belief in Jesus or baptism and entry into the Church does not make a person into a non-Jew. According to Jewish law the person is no less Jewish, and is just as responsible for observing the commandments as any other. That said, the social entity of the Jewish community vociferously rejects belief in Jesus as a legitimate expression of Judaism. The state of Israel understands things similarly – Jews who publicly profess belief in Jesus as Messiah are understood to have converted to Christianity. They are considered to have actively changed religion and as such are not eligible under the Law of Return to make aliyah as

Jews. Naturally this political-legal decision has no effect on their religious, halachic status as Jews.

Conclusion

There are several possible approaches to Jewish-Christian relations. One of them is to focus on the common ground, the similarities, and the areas of overlap. That emphasis makes some initial sense, but only up to a point. If we go past that point and forget to also attend carefully to those places where we differ, we quickly end up with an attempt at Jewish-Christian relations that collapses in on itself, for several reasons. One of these is simply that without difference, there's ultimately no need for dialogue. Another is the

real danger of building a Judaism or Christianity focused on our similarities that might be unrecognizable to actual practitioners.

For our purposes here, however, the most important danger is this: we tend to think that similarity would make it easier for us to work together, more able to build strong and lasting alliances. Much contemporary Christian support for Israel, for example, has walked in this path of highlighting similarities and downplaying or ignoring the dissimilarities between Jews and Christians. And indeed that has worked at a superficial level. The real danger appears when reality is ultimately encountered – that despite our common ground, our differences are profound

and true alliances are difficult to build and even more so to maintain.

Our ability to work together, to develop alliances, and to cultivate real friendships with one another as Jews and Christians is only hampered by giving too much preeminence to our similarities without equal attention to our differences and places of misunderstanding. We cannot afford relationships that are hasty and superficial; rather we need partnerships that can go the distance in a complex and changing global environment. We will be able to enjoy precisely that not by denying our areas of difference, but as a result of recognizing, understanding and truly respecting those very differences.