



18.7x23.95	1/2	עמוד 38	the jerusalem report	01/09/2020	74287668-8
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו - 80790					



COMMENTARY SIMONE COHEN SCOTT

Bringing Nostra Aetate forward

THIS YEAR marks the 55th anniversary of Nostra Aetate, Latin for “In Our Time.” This is a document passed at the Second Vatican Council on October 25, 1965, by Pope Paul VI, which repudiated the 2,000-year-old charge of deicide against the Jewish people, and affirmed that the Jews’ relationship with the God of Israel is eternal, and cannot be broken.

The document also negates any necessity to convert Jews to Christianity. An influential role in the wording of Nostra Aetate was played by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century. He would no doubt have had in mind that when Theodor Herzl approached Pope Pius to discuss Zionism, he was emphatically told that until the Jews converted to Christianity, the Catholic Church would not help them return to Zion.

Shining a spotlight on this watershed event of 50 years earlier indicates a sincere effort on the part of the Catholic Church to understand the Jewish roots of the Christian faith, to express bottomless regret, and to try as far as possible to make amends for the irreparable harm caused by religious antisemitism throughout history. (Martin Luther brought it with him into the Reformation.)

Commemorative events such as lectures, discussions, film showings, as well as interfaith worship services, focused on such injustices, working to build bridges between faiths. Attention was drawn to books such as *Antisemitism: The Longest Hatred* by Robert S. Wistrich, and *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews, A History* by James Carroll. Until these 50th anniversary commemorations were scheduled, I personally, who had studied religion in university, and have since taken many courses on antisemitism, was not familiar with Nostra Aetate.

I only became interested in learning about this document when, in my hometown of Winnipeg, Canada, a series of three commemorative events were held at a Catholic Church, to which Protestant Christians and Jews were invited. Interest took hold there among the audience, and a desire to work towards healing the breach led to the development of study groups, which in turn culminated in a follow-up series two years later for further learning. These sessions were better attended by Protestant Christians than the earlier ones, and particularly so by Jews, eager to learn about the others’ faith.

The featured speaker at this follow-up series of lectures was Dr. Ruth Ashrafi. She has taught Jewish history at universities in the Netherlands, Israel, and Canada, and is a frequent speaker on Rabbinic Judaism, Hebrew Bible, and various other related topics at synagogues, churches, and study groups. Her first lecture was entitled “Jesus in the Context of the First Century.”

When Rome initially ended the autonomy of the Israelite nation, making Judea, Samaria, and Idumea one province, neither the Jews nor their religion were immediately subjugated. By the time of Jesus’s ministry however, (roughly 30 CE), Rome’s governance had progressed through gradually tightening stages to an unbearable level of oppression. The Jewish population began to long for, was impatient for, their expected leader the Messiah, to arrive on the scene and lead a successful revolt, restoring the nation to its former glory under King David.

Young men of passionate temperament, called Zealots, formed an organized resistance, anticipating a militant uprising at any moment. They did not expect, nor did they recognize, a spiritual revival. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, instead of taking charge of the group and leading an insurrection, he lost no time chastizing the members of the Pharisees, his own sect, pointing out that they were seriously in contravention of the Law as given in the Torah. His scoldings, such as overturning the money changers’ tables in the Temple grounds, demonstrated his horror of how badly the Word of God had been corrupted.

At no time did Jesus suggest a new religion; his intention was to get the old one back on track. His teachings most often emphasized the admonition to love one another. Being a learned and observant Jew himself, he taught his companions that this was the basic tenet of the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible). Of course, the power brokers of the time, many of whom were the priests in the Temple, could not abide such simplicity.

In her second lecture, Dr. Ashrafi introduced the audience to a book published in 1879, entitled *An Orthodox Rabbi Reads the New Testament*, by Rabbi Eliyahu Soloveitchik, born in Lithuania in 1805 of the revered Volozhiner/Soloveitchik Rabbinic lineage. His book, a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, written in Hebrew titled *Kol Kore* (a calling voice), has been translated into French, German, and English, under the title “The Bible, the



18.15x23.3	2/2	עמוד 39	the jerusalem report	01/09/2020	74287669-9
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונות - 80790					

Talmud and the Gospel.”

In this book, the rabbi carefully analyzes the common ground of belief between each of these texts, what they were, and how their meanings had been misconstrued, or lost in translation. The learned rabbi came to realize it was a later misreading of Jesus’s teaching that wrought the gulf between the two faiths. Based on a lifetime of intense familiarity and experience with the writings and languages of the Jewish sages, Rabbi Soloveitchik found that in fact the New Testament and the Talmud do not oppose each other.

The language of the *Tanakh* is Hebrew. The common vernacular in Jesus’s time was Aramaic. The first four books (the Gospels) of the New Testament were written in Greek. This means that Jesus taught in Aramaic what Moses wrote in Hebrew, and his teachings were later recorded in Greek. Nuance of meaning undoubtedly would be altered.

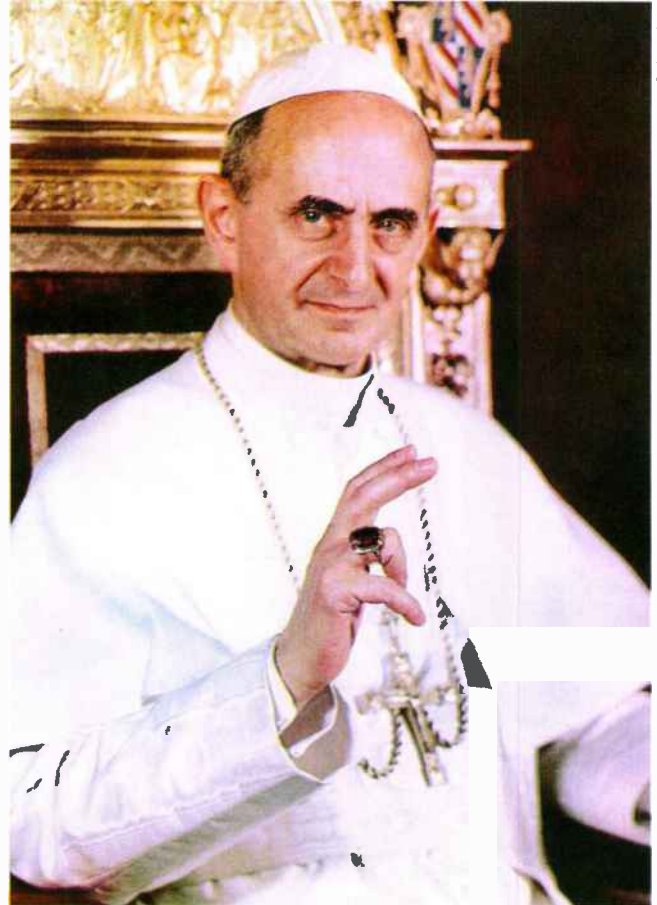
Furthermore, Matthew, Mark, and John, three of the four recorders of these happenings, although contemporaries of Jesus and counted among his Twelve Disciples (later called Apostles), did not write their accounts at that time. In fact, their Gospels were not even begun to be written down until at least 40 years after Jesus’s death, and were actually not completed until a century later.

Luke, the author of the third gospel, wasn’t on the scene at all during Jesus’s lifetime. Scholars of Christianity maintain that he was not a Jew but a Gentile, or that if he were a Jew, he was thoroughly Hellenized, that is, had left Jewish teaching and had fully absorbed Greek philosophy. Yet he authored a very large portion of the New Testament, namely the Book of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. It is generally believed he reported from eyewitness accounts, decades later, after the message began to be taken to the Gentiles.

It is from these accounts that subsequent translations have been made. In spite of the best of intentions, accuracy would nevertheless have given place to interpretation. It is important to keep in mind here that there are only around 8,000 Hebrew words in the *Tanach*, whereas the Greek language has five million words. English has fewer than a million. In between Hebrew and the Greek, the spoken language was Aramaic. Myriads of choices would have needed to be made. Scholars will tell you that familiarity with Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic is a must, as well as a knowledge of the history of the era, in order to understand the nuance of phrases rendered in an ancient vernacular.

Dr. Ashafri’s third lecture touched on the fact that in Christian denominations much has been made of Jesus’s relentless criticism of the Pharisees, the sect of which he was a member. This had been erroneously taken as a condemnation once and for all. It wasn’t; it was an admonition to take stock. Jewish sages have always been given to building character in themselves and their students. Their emphasis has always been an attempt to work to distill the virtue in the human soul.

The sages believed that human beings are born with two inclinations, the *Yetzer Hatov* and the *Yetzer Hara* – the inclination to do good and inclination to do evil – and that each person has free choice to choose which inclination to follow. Dr. Ashafri presented a chart based on Rabbinic teaching, analyzing seven Pharisee types having certain combinations of character defects: varying degrees of hypocrisy; self-satisfaction; self-righteousness; selfish-



VATICAN CITY

Pope Paul VI in 1963

ness; pride. The striving for virtue, which Jesus also highlighted, has been the basic tenet of Jewish teaching throughout the ages. It is interesting to note that the Jews of today are descendants of the Pharisees.

Two remarkable guidebooks contain the essence of Jewish teaching. One, *Pirkei Avot* (translated as Ethics of the Fathers), is a compilation of admonitions of the sages, 300 BCE to 200 CE. It is considered a tool for developing character, as well as for improving the world. The other is by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kahan, better known as the Chofetz Chaim. His main work is concerned with appropriate speech, Lashon Hara, meaning an evil tongue, which outlines the power of words, and the discipline required to use them to good purpose. A careful choice of words encourages choice of the good inclination.

A potent synopsis of this characteristic of human nature is articulated in the New Testament’s Letter of James, believed to be Jesus’s brother, also a devout Jew. Actually, the wisdom of James would be very appropriate alongside *Pirkei Avot* and the Chofetz Chaim in any Jewish library. ■

Simone Cohen Scott is a Canadian Israeli who splits her year between Jerusalem and Winnipeg.