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Sefirah Study

Portraits of the Holy Land: Antiquity to the Present
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Week 5 Conclusion
Jews and Christians: The Unfinished Agenda
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Every rabbi knows the expression “*Mah Yomru Ha-Goyim?*” “What Will The Nations/Gentiles/Christians Say?” regarding issues or beliefs important to the Jewish community.

In many cases it matters almost not at all what the “Other” may or may not think about Jews or Judaism. That is because, surprise! surprise! the various Christian church bodies also have a host of serious internal problems and issues to confront, and hopefully solve.

As a result, they are frequently unaware or not tuned into what we as Jews do, say, or affirm.

For example, when the Reform movement intensifies its search for the spirituality” that our laypeople say they want, many Christians, clergy and laity alike, are only, superficially interested, if at all, in our quest for that elusive goal. That is because they, too, are also engaged in a similar spiritual exercise themselves.

They may compare notes with us, but they, like our own religious community, are generally turned inward focusing on their own denomination or church bodies.

There is, of course, interest within the Christian community how the Jewish community handles or mishandles the critical issues surrounding sexuality and gender. That is because, once again, the Christian community is debating, sometimes publicly, sometimes privately, the same set of questions, albeit in its own terms.

Christians are curious how the Jewish community encounters the questions raised by modernity, bioethics, and accommodation to the omnipresent American cultural scene as they must answer the same questions and confront the same realities.

But there is one question, theme or issue that does grab the immediate attention of almost all Christians. It is, of course, the six letter word I S R A E L.

If you seek proof for my statement, just try this out the next time you participate in a Christian-Jewish interreligious program.

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Ask participants to write their definition of the word "Israel" on a 3x5 index card. Collect the cards and then read aloud their responses. Jews generally describe Israel as the modern Jewish state that achieved its independence in 1948. For some Jews Israel also may mean the Jewish people.

The Christian responses frequently differ from the Jewish definitions. Christians often equate Israel with the ancient people mentioned in the Bible. Others perceive Israel as the new "people of God," i.e., Christians, Christianity and the Church, while Jews represent the "Old Israel" and Christians are the "New Israel."

There is also another element at work vis-à-vis modern Israel and the Christian-Jewish encounter. Some Christians find it difficult to understand the strong Jewish commitment to that specific land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The Jewish theology of the Land is perceived as an acute form of Jewish particularism ("real estate theology"), while Christianity is viewed as "universal," a faith not linked to any geographical location. Jews in their attachment to Israel are "earthy," while Christians are purely "spiritual."

This especially evident when Christian scholars and/or clergy speak of the "Two Jerusalems." The first is the earthy city where Jesus lived, taught, was killed, and then resurrected. That Jerusalem was a necessary "launching pad" for the rise of Christianity.

But there is the second Jerusalem is the "Heavenly City," a model of theological perfection, an otherworldly place where Jesus dwells in glory. It is this Jerusalem that resonates in so many Christian hymns and anthems, in so many prayers, and in so many sermons.

Of course, the duality of Jerusalem also conforms to the larger Christian conception of an earthy, gritty, legalistic Judaism as compared to the universal, transcendent pure Christianity--- particularism vs. universalism.

But even with this dichotomy, Christians will always be concerned about Israel because it is, of course, the land of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. For that reason alone, Israel impacts directly into the religious consciousness of Christians.

How could it be otherwise? Bethlehem, Nazareth, Cana, the River Jordan, and the Sea of Galilee aka Kinneret are sometimes as familiar to Christians as the geography of their home countries. Visit almost any Christian Sunday School class, and you will see wall maps of Israel. However, those same maps usually reflect the Biblical period and the entire area is called the "Holy Land," and not Israel.

Nonetheless, I believe modern Israel must be at the center of any authentic Christian-Jewish encounter. This became especially true following the 1967 Six Day War and it has intensified in recent years as Israel, the "land of the Bible," the land "where Jesus walked," the "Holy Land" is seen more and more as an ally of the United States.

But despite the alliance between Israel and the United States, it is my belief that Christian support for the security and survival of Israel is N O T based upon geopolitical goals, oil, or an anti-terrorism alliance.

Rather, American Christian support for modern Israel is primarily based upon shared moral values, the knowledge that Israel is a functioning democracy, and the fact that Israel is ardently seeking peace with its Arab neighbors, especially the Palestinians. But the sense that Israel is part of the extended Christian "family" cannot be over emphasized.

Indeed, there can be no meaningful "dialogue" between Christians and Jews without the State of Israel, its history, meaning, security, and survival being placed "on the interreligious table."

The various interreligious guides that were published before the 1967 Six Day War contain almost no mention of modern Israel. Its role in the Christian-Jewish encounter was nearly invisible. Although it has been stated many times, an important fact needs to be reaffirmed again: the 1967 War was a critical turning point not only for the Middle East but for interreligious relations as well. Today, true dialogue is impossible with the state of Israel occupying a central place in such an encounter.

This is because the reemergence of an independent Jewish state has compelled Jews and Christians to examine themselves and each other in a new light. But unfortunately, Israel is often a cause of misunderstanding and even antagonism between the two groups.

Many thoughtful Christian dialogue participants readily confess how little they actually know about the state of Israel: its origins, its purpose, its people, its problems, and its hopes. Even though the Middle East is one of the most documented and reported subjects in the entire world, many Christians have gained limited knowledge of the region from authors who refuse to accept the legitimacy and permanence of the Jewish state, or from authors who make exclusive apocalyptic Christian theological claims for Israel.

Neither view is helpful in gaining a balanced and accurate picture of modern Israel. But in interreligious encounters more than a description of Israel is needed; a prescription for action is also required to advance the cause of a just and lasting peace between Israel and its neighbors.

Attention must be given to the intense Jewish love and passion for the land of Israel that has been eloquently expressed in countless prayers, poems, songs, biblical verses, commentaries, sermons, and books. The long record of Jewish attachment to Israel is extremely well documented and must be an integral part of any dialogue. Jewish self-understanding demands that the inextricable links with the land of Israel be essential elements in any interreligious meeting.

The distinguished historian James Parkes believes the Jews' real "title deed" to the Land of Israel is "the actual continuity of Jewish life...from Roman up to modern times. If the number of Jewish inhabitants has constantly varied, it has been because of circumstances outside Jewish control, and not because Jews had themselves lost interest in living in their 'promised land.' On

the whole it may be said that it was always as large as possible in view of conditions existing at any one time."

In addition to the religious and historical attachment to the land, there is also an abiding Jewish commitment to the security and survival of Israel. The reborn Jewish state has set off an earthquake of emotions and fervor that has radically transformed the Jewish people. Israel, with its Jewish majority, has ended nearly 2,000 years of Jewish powerlessness in the world.

Jews are fully aware that Israel, like every other nation-state, has imperfections and defects. Yet they are profoundly stirred by the rebirth of a democratic Jewish state, and by the remarkable spectacle of Jews from 130 countries "coming home to Zion" after centuries of living in the Diaspora.

Zionism, the national liberation movement of the Jewish people, needs to be included in any discussion of modern Israel. Happily, the infamous UN General Assembly resolution of 1975 that equated Zionism with racism has been rescinded, but some of the toxicity surrounding Zionism still remains within elements of the Christian and Islamic communities.

Zionism is best understood as a great "tent of meeting" for the Jewish people. There are many legitimate and authentic expressions of the movement that created the state of Israel. Zionism, like its creation, the state of Israel, is not monolithic. Like so much else in Jewish life, it is diverse, often conflicting, and intensely passionate.

Like every other national movement, Zionism cannot be reduced to a mere slogan or catch phrase. Its basic goal of reestablishing and maintaining an independent Jewish state in the land of Israel remains unchanged. And while there are differing approaches by Jews regarding Zion, they are all united when it comes to Israel's survival and security.

The rebirth of Israel in 1948 was for many Christians a refutation of a long-held theology. The despised surplus people had risen from the actual ashes of Auschwitz and had reentered history as a free and sovereign people in their own land. Old negative anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as a people "cursed and punished by God" have remained embedded in some Christian teaching and preaching along with the baleful image of the exiled "wandering" Jew.

The creation of Israel meant that Jews and Christians as well as Muslims and Jews have crossed into new and uncharted relationships. These new relationships need to be explored within the interreligious dialogue.

That exploration has already begun among many Christian leaders. Marvin R. Wilson, a prominent American Evangelical scholar, has described his own understanding of the state of Israel:

. . . the remarkable preservation of Israel over the centuries and her recent return to the land are in keeping with those many biblical texts which give promise of her future. But my concern and support for Israel only begins with the predictive prophetic texts; it does not end there. The more relevant prophetic texts . . . are those which speak to Israel's present

situation by calling men and nations to practice justice, righteousness, kindness, and brotherhood in their dealings with one another.

The Christian and Islamic historic relationships to the land of Israel are also key components of interreligious relations today. All three religions have attachments, albeit different ones, to the land. Indeed, the various names given to the land clearly reveal the many political, religious, and social forces that have been at work during the last 3,500 years: Canaan, Israel, Judea, the Promised Land, the Holy Land, Palestine, and South Syria.

All three faiths resonate spiritually to the city of Jerusalem. In the Islamic tradition, deeply influenced by Judaism and Christianity, the city, al-Quds (the Holy One) in Arabic, ranks only behind Mecca and Medina in sanctity.

Although the Prophet Muhammad never visited Jerusalem, and the city's name does not appear in the Qu'ran, Muslims believe he was miraculously transported from Mecca to Jerusalem, to the rock of Abraham's sacrifice on Mount Moriah. From there Muhammad made his nocturnal ascent into heaven on his winged horse, al-Buraq (Lightning).

Unlike the Islamic example of Jerusalem acquiring sacred status without Muhammad ever entering the city, the Christian attachment exists because of specific events in the life and death of Jesus within Jerusalem. As the city of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, Jerusalem contains many holy places that trigger deep spiritual responses from Christians.

Christians have called Jerusalem axis mundi, the center of the world. It is the city where the Passion took place, the city where salvational events unfolded, and it was the scene of Pentecost, the birthday of the Christian church.

Over the centuries, Western Christians have come to Jerusalem as pilgrims to retrace the steps of Jesus, to visit the holy places associated with his life and death, and to pray. Sometimes the pilgrims came in war as Crusaders and sometimes they came in peace to build schools, hospitals, libraries, and hospices. For many other Christians, no pilgrimage was needed since they were born in the Holy City as members of Eastern Orthodox churches.

The Jewish passion for Y'rushalayim (City of Peace) is quite different from the Islamic and Christian connections to Jerusalem. The city decisively entered into Jewish self-consciousness when King David made it the political and religious capital of the Israelites around 980 B.C.E.

For the past 3,000 years there has been an unbroken link between the city and the Jewish people. It is beyond the scope of this publication to describe in detail the central role of Jerusalem in Jewish liturgy, poetry, and writings. However, a verse from Psalm 137—"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning"—and the concluding prayer at the Passover Seder—"Next year in Jerusalem!"—graphically describe the Jewish bond with Jerusalem.

For Jews, Jerusalem is no mere collection of holy places; instead, the entire city is sacred. Krister Stendahl, the former dean of the Harvard Divinity School, and a leading Christian

scholar, has aptly written:

For Christians and Muslims that term [holy sites] is an adequate expression of what matters. Here are sacred places, hallowed by the most holy events, here are the places for pilgrimage, the very focus of highest devotion. But Judaism is different . . . The sites sacred to Judaism have no shrines. Its religion is not tied to "sites," but to the land, not to what happened in Jerusalem, but to Jerusalem itself.

For the sake of achieving interreligious amity, it would be a grave mistake to equate the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic links with Jerusalem. Each is different from the other in many ways, and authentic dialogue requires that differences, especially as they relate to a key issue like Jerusalem, be fully expressed and not papered over to gain a false sense of harmony.

Like theological anti-Semitism, Israel, and Zionism, Jerusalem is a major topic on the interreligious agenda. But the three faith groups relate to the city in profoundly different ways. Those unique responses to Jerusalem must be honored, and not minimized.

Complicating interreligious relations is the fact that the late Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat and some of his followers have falsely alleged in recent years that the two Jewish Holy Temples in Jerusalem never existed and they further rejected the historical fact that Jews were residing in the land of Israel 3000 years ago. Arafat called such claims Israeli propaganda, but unfortunately, some people believe Arafat's ugly lies whose aim is to delegitimize and diplomatically isolate Israel.

Such claims must be vigorously opposed in any authentic interreligious encounter.

The two readings I have suggested describe in some detail the importance of Israel in the collective Christian mentality as well as the central importance of the Holocaust in Christian-Jewish relations.

In no way should Israel be described as a "Holocaust State" or the result of Western Christian guilt for the Shoah following the end of World War II in 1945. We all know that modern Zionism predated the rise of Nazism. However, one should not underestimate the importance of the Holocaust in contemporary Christian thinking especially regarding modern Israel.

In this on-line course we shall carefully study the three basic Christian responses to the modern State of Israel and also explore how Israel today, at age 57, impacts upon the interreligious encounter/engagement/dialogue between Jews and Christians.