

“TO GET TO KNOW, TO UNDERSTAND AND TO RESPECT EACH OTHER”

Commencement address at Hebrew Union College Los Angeles,

May 15th 2006

Peter von der Osten-Sacken

Dear President, dear Dean and Friend Lewis Barth, dear colleagues and students, ladies and gentlemen.

We have a guideline in our German Protestant Church which says: “You may preach whatever you want, but not longer than twenty minutes.” To protect myself against any temptation of this kind, I have chosen as a guideline a story and, especially, a saying from your own tradition. Probably known to all of you, it goes back about two thousand years. Promised by a Gentile that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel would teach him the whole Torah while he – the Gentile – would be standing on one foot, the Rabbi answered: “That which is odious to yourself, do not do to your neighbour; for this is the whole Torah.” I will refer to this story at the end of my address again. I chose it for the beginning not only because it is short and invites and obligates one to brevity, but for another reason as well. Of course, the fellow who comes to Hillel seems to be somewhat lazy, yet he might be a bit embarrassed at the same time. He obviously is impressed by Judaism; otherwise he wouldn’t ask to know its essence. Nevertheless, he seems to be a little confused and perplexed by its variety and the number of rules which guide its life. Thus he might feel like we do at certain moments in our life when we start a new period, entering an almost unknown terrain, that is, probably like most of you now feel at the end of your studies. The Bible itself shows that the problem and the necessity to find leading rules which enable a general and sometimes quick orientation for our conduct are much more older and go back to its own times. Sometimes it’s just one sentence or one point which is underlined, as in the case of the so-called Golden Rule, noted by Hillel. Sometimes it contains three points, as in the summary of the prophetic message formulated by the prophet Micah (6:8): “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Sometimes there is a bit more to learn as is the case with the Ten Commandments, which are a summary for orientation as well. Yet they are a somewhat long summary. Most of the summarizing rules of life are much shorter. The community of the Dead Sea Scrolls chose the one sentence of the prophet Micah just cited, enriching it by two or three terms of their own. Jesus chose a sentence close to that of Hillel and interpreted the Golden Rule as a form of the commandment to love one’s neighbour (comp. Matthew 7,12; 22,34-40), as did ancient Jewish tradition in general. The Gospel of Matthew underlined justice, mercy and faith (23,23); the Apostle Paul chose faith, love and hope (I Corinthians 13,13). A real treasure of summarizing, guiding rules is the tractate *The Sayings of the Fathers/Pirke Abot* of the Talmud resp. the Mischnah. It connects every early teacher with at least one guiding principle, for example the first teacher mentioned in this tractate, Simon the Just (1:2): “On three things does the world stand: On the Torah, and on worship, and on deeds of loving kindness.” This tractate is an impressive testimony to the fact that not only students, like Hillel’s Gentile, have to learn guiding rules. Even before this every teacher is obliged not only to offer important material to students, but also to formulate and to live an ethical orientation which helps the next generation to take part in building its future in a humane way.

Because it is the task of every generation to find its own leading rules, it would be an interesting undertaking to follow the footsteps of those who have done so since ancient times. Of course this is impossible here. Thus we now take a large jump, bringing us nearer to the present. The eighties of the 19th century were a very hard time for Jewish communities in Russia and Germany,

bringing with them persecutions in Russia as well as an anti-Semitic movement in Germany, especially in Berlin. The hostility also spilled over into the German army and influenced the relationship between Christian and Jewish soldiers. In this situation one of the rabbis in the army proclaimed that motto which I chose as the title for my present address: "What we need," he said, "is to get to know, to understand, and to respect each other." Since the very beginning, when I first read this motto twenty years ago, I have found it to be of the same clearness and the same helpfulness as those sentences which I mentioned at the outset and which are rooted in biblical and rabbinical times. "What we need is to get to know, to understand and to respect each other." This guideline seems to be helpful for the relationship between Christians and Jews, and of course for the adherents of other religions as well. It is also a helpful guideline for our personal conduct in daily relationships, and for our social and political behavior. It may be especially urgent today when we are aware of a growing alienation between cultures - in a time when even the farthest neighbor on the other side of the world is only some hours away. Not long ago, one of the teachers and preachers, who is in our midst today - I will name him a bit later -, moved in the same direction and formulated like his 19th century forerunner:

"I do not know what will come of this encounter [the Jewish-Christian one], but it is clearly worthwhile. In the twentieth century walls have been built between peoples more often than bridges, and of late, the urgent work of understanding the other has been neglected or abandoned. Some say that dialogue is passé, but I would argue the opposite: if we want to live together on this bruised planet without more butchery, we must seek and create more moments of connection."

"To get to know, to understand, and to respect each other" - this motto is not the solution to our problems, but rather an invitation, a guideline which can help us to find a way, a path, in our relationships. It may even be necessary to underline another aspect. On the one hand, there may very often be a three-step experience: to get to know each other in the beginning - to understand each other on the basis of it - and then to respect each other. On the other hand, it seems important to maintain that one can view these three points like the three sides of a triangle as well, for we owe each other a basic respect as human beings even if we haven't gotten to know and don't understand each other yet.

Let us now ponder the issue as we have to do as students and teachers, that is, let us question the whole thesis. Is this really a generally possible guideline - to get to know, to understand, to respect each other? Are there no situations where this movement doesn't function? Moreover, are there no situations where it might be wrong or impossible to understand, or at least be narrowly limited? Here I shall hint at three of these. The first and the second one have to do with the danger of understanding; the third is of another nature.

Our understanding of one another might easily turn into a conflict as soon as we not only have an exchange of ideas, but especially when someone's deeds have evil consequences. Understanding is always in the process of accepting the other person. However, there are deeds which are to be *explained* but *not* to be *understood*. I think that especially Judaism, as a religion which insists on repentance and also enables repentance, has been aware of this aspect from the beginning, as is Christianity on the basis of our common Bible.

The fact that understanding always is in the process of accepting includes another factor, which could be viewed as dangerous. The more I understand the other, the more I might be attracted to his way of life, to his religion, to his ideology. And at the end there might be the strong wish on my part not only to accept the other and to respect him, but also to be like him. Even if we have to respect every honest personal decision, we all surely agree that this is not the kind of understanding our anonymous Jewish military chaplain had in mind.

As indicated before, there is still another kind of limit to the way we understand each other, and I think it is this direction which the chaplain had in mind. What I am thinking of has been circumscribed by the famous Jewish religious thinker Martin Buber. He said with regard to dialogue that both sides, Jews and Christians, are centered around a mystery which in its deepest core remains a mystery to the other one. But what we can do is to acknowledge the other one in this mystery as it is, to share what we know about the common ground and our common hope, to try to be what we should be, and to try to do what we should do.

How the 19th century rabbi whose “Golden Rule” I have brought with me from Berlin formulated his sentence was a sign of nobleness. The hostile reactions in his time, of course, came from the majority in the army, that is, from soldiers with a Christian background. However, he didn’t say: “What we need is that *you* get to know *us*,” but rather: “What we need is to get to know ... *each other*.” It was a similar experience of nobleness which I myself had when, after an incomparably desolate period in my own country and church, I went to Israel in 1960 for the first time. I had the same experience again twenty years later, when contact between Los Angeles and Berlin was established first by my dear friend and colleague Prof. Lewis Barth in Berlin, and some years later in L.A. itself, together with the colleagues and friends Prof. Michael Signer from HUC, Dr. Neil Sandberg from the American Jewish Committee, and last but not least Rabbi Sanford Ragins, whom I cited some minutes before. Because all of them reacted in the same noble way, I want to cordially include all of them by name when I now express my deep gratitude to the Hebrew Union College – Institute of Jewish Religion for its decision to confer upon me the degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, *honoris causa*. All I can say is: Thank you very, very much. I lack the words to appropriately express myself and especially to do it in English.

Dear students, now eagerly looking forward to your own graduation ceremony, you might hope that my own foot will already be getting tired. So it is. Let me conclude this way. First, I really will never forget the unexpected honor and great pleasure to speak to you today. Secondly, I am sure that the Gentile we started with was not only a bit lazy, not only curious and somewhat confused, but also that he thought it was especially clever to try to make Hillel embarrassed. Yet the great teacher seems to have been one step ahead of him. He answered as he did: “That which is odious to yourself, do not do to your neighbour; for this is the whole Torah.” He then continued, and one might think that he did it while smiling: “The rest is commentary – go and learn.” Perhaps our whole life may be understood in this sense as a commentary on Hillel’s rule. Go and learn. And may God bless you on your way.
