



CONGREGATION
SHOMREI EMUNAH

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS:
SHARED VALUES AND THE
LIMITS OF COOPERATION

PART II

MOTZEI SHABBOS CHANUKAH
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R. Aaron Kohler - With Rav, The Rav (vol 1 p 49)

With the advent of the ecumenical thrust of the Catholic Church in the 1960s, the Rav was consulted regarding Orthodox participation in the dialogue initiated by the Vatican with Jewish leaders. Rabbi Soloveitchik opposed many aspects of this dialogue. He held that there could be no discussion concerning the uniqueness of the respective religious communities. Each, he held, was an individual entity which could not be merged or equated with the other, since each was committed to a different faith. The Rav presented a paper entitled "Confrontation" on this topic at the 1964 midwinter conference of the Rabbinical Council. Its presentation led to the formulation of an RCA policy statement which reflected the Rav's viewpoint. He later published an expanded version of this seminal essay in *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, a journal published by the Rabbinical Council. Appended to the Rav's essay was the statement adopted by the RCA at the 1964 conference. It declared:

R. Bernard Rosensweig, "The Rav as Communal Leader," in Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Man of Halacha, Man of Faith (pp 247-248)

In a similar vein, the Rav provided direction for the Torah community on how to address non-Jewish religious manifestations. In *Confrontation*, the first essay of the Rav's to appear in English,⁸ the Rav developed the ground rules for that very delicate and potentially dangerous relationship. We need not re-articulate those positions here, but it was in keeping with those principles that the Rav took a strong stand on Vatican II. In 1960, at the time of Vatican II, the Jewish community was asked to send representatives to the Council as observers. Then, like today, there was a strong inclination in certain circles not just to go to the Vatican, but to run. The Rav was unalterably opposed to sending Jewish observers to participate in Vatican II, which was, in his view, strictly a Christian matter. Indeed, no official observers were sent. The minute the Rav opposed it, Dr Nachum Goldman, who was anxious to participate, withdrew rather than oppose the Rav and jeopardize the unity of the Jewish community.⁹

In 1962, the Rav had a secret meeting with Cardinal Willebrands, a Church liberal who was very friendly to Jews and very active on Vatican II, at Willebrands' request. The purpose was to discuss the possibility of a religious dialogue between Jews and Christians. The Rav rejected this notion totally, using the basic arguments which he had developed in *Confrontation*. He understood the missionary character of Christianity and its commitment to both demonstrate its truth and persuade individuals and groups to accept salvation through a Christian affirmation of faith.¹⁰

The RCA remained loyal to the guidelines which the Rav had set down and distinguished between theological discussions and ethical-secular concerns, which have universal validity. Every program involving either Catholic or Protestant churches in which we participated was carefully scrutinized and analyzed—we literally would go over it with a fine-toothed comb. Every topic which had possible theological nuances or implications was vetoed, and only when the Rav pronounced it to be satisfactory did we proceed to the dialogue.

R. Louis Bernstein, Challenge and Mission (p 206)

The most interesting aspect of Rabbinical Council and interfaith work commences just as the scope of this study terminates. At the end of 1960, Dr. Nachum Goldman, the leader of the World Zionist Movement and the World Jewish Congress, called a meeting of American religious groups, including the Rabbinical Council of America and Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, to discuss the acceptance of a possible invitation to attend the Vatican's Ecumenical Council in Rome. He told the meeting that it was quite possible that an invitation would be forthcoming if it would be accepted.¹¹

Moses Feuerstein, the president of the U.O.J.C.A., turned to Soloveitchik for guidance. Soloveitchik told Max Davidson, the president of the Synagogue Council, that his organization's position of support endangered the Rabbinical Council's participation. He also threatened to have the Mizrahi pull out of the Zionist movement for the same reason.¹¹

The invitation was never extended for its acceptance was effectively blocked. What followed will be a most interesting chapter in the subsequent chronicles of the Rabbinical Council and American Jewry.

R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Rav at Jubilee: An Appreciation," in Leaves of Faith (vol. 1 p 197-198)

The second instance concerns interfaith rather than intracommunal relations, although it, too, had internal ramifications. I refer, of course, to the Rav's adamant stand against Jewish-Christian theological dialogue. Concerned, in the wake of Catholic overtures encouraged by the thaw in anti-Semitism mandated by the Second Vatican Council, that the sense of the singularity and uniqueness of *Knesset Yisrael* might become jaded, both within and without the Jewish world, the Rav fought vigorously against incipient ecumenism. He, and only he, had both the stature and the courage to restrain those who, whether *leshem shammayim* or otherwise – the prospect of having one's picture with the Pope appear on the front page of the *New York Times* is no mean temptation – sought the warm embrace of our erstwhile contempters; and the policy he enunciated – assent to dialogue about moral or social issues but rejection of discussions of faith and dogma – has stood the Orthodox community in good stead. In retrospect, some may feel that the Rav's anxiety about missionary impulses and possible mass apostasy was exaggerated. Be that as it may, the episode – and it was more than that – boldly manifested the Rav's engagement in communal affairs and the leadership he exercised in that capacity.

R. Walter Wurtzburger, "Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Poseh of Post-Modern Orthodoxy," in Tradition (Vol. 29 no. 4 Fall 1994, p. 16)

Because of his deep-rooted conviction that Jews have an ethico-religious responsibility to the world at large, the Rav found it necessary to devise a formula to enable Jewish participation in inter-religious consultations and activities without jeopardizing the integrity and uniqueness of the Jewish faith experience. Contrary to widespread misconceptions, his essay "Confrontation" and the guidelines for interfaith discussions were not intended to forestall meaningful exchanges between representatives of Judaism and of other religions. Rabbi Isadore Twersky, the Rav's son-in-law, told me that at one time the Rav considered an invitation to deliver a lecture at the the Christian-Jewish colloquium held at the Harvard Divinity School. Moreover, the Rav's classic article "The Lonely Man of Faith" was first presented as an oral lecture at a Catholic seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts. While he looked upon interreligious discussions of purely theological issues as exercises in futility, he approved of discussions devoted to socio-political issues, in spite of the fact that as he noted in a footnote to "Confrontation,"²⁰ for people of faith such issues are not secular concerns but are grounded in theological convictions.

R. Moshe Meiselman, "The Rav, Feminism and Public Policy," in Tardition (1998 vol. 33 no. 1)

p. 22

When Pope John XXIII opened dialogue with Jews, the Rav viewed this as a serious danger to Judaism and declared in an unequivocal manner that such dialogue should not be pursued. His classic article, Confrontation, expressed his reasoning. Despite the opposition of a few Orthodox rabbis, the Rav's position carried the day and almost without exception no dialogues have been conducted between Orthodox rabbis and the Catholic Church. The Rav felt that it was the responsibility of

D. Singer and M. Soloh, "An Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Lonely Man of Faith," in Modern Judaism (Oct. 1982)

Is it going too far to maintain that Soloveitchik's strangely negative attitude toward inter-religious dialogue is prompted by a lingering concern over what they would say in "Brisk." Of course, there is nothing strange per se in the view that Jews should desist from discussing matters of faith with Christians or others. This position may easily be sustained on both prudential and

theological grounds. Soloveitchik himself has chosen the latter route, arguing in "Confrontation" "the word of faith reflects the intimate, the private, the paradoxically inexpressible cravings of the individual for . . . his Maker. It reflects the numinous character and the strangeness of the act of faith of a particular community which is totally incomprehensible to the man of a different faith community." Fair enough, but how can Joseph Soloveitchik say this? Has he not read widely in Christian theology? Does he not point to Kierkegaard, Barth, and Otto as thinkers who have plumbed the depths of religious experience? Most importantly, has he not drawn on these Christian theologians in formulating his own Jewish theology? If, despite all this, Soloveitchik can take a stand in opposition to inter-faith discussions, it seems likely that, deep down, he feels a certain amount of guilt over what he is doing. After all, in "Brisk" the talmudists did not read Christian religious works. That much restraint—and here Soloveitchik's modernity again comes to the fore—he is not prepared to show. But at least, Soloveitchik apparently feels that there is no need to talk to the goyim in public.⁹

Lawrence Kaplan, "Revisionism and the Rav," in Judaism (Summer 1991)

Because R. Meiselman misunderstands the Rav's position regarding universalism and singularism, he also misunderstands and misrepresents the Rav's stance on interfaith dialogue. R. Meiselman, referring to the Rav's essay "Confrontation," claims that "When Pope John XXIII opened dialogue with the Jews, the Rav viewed this as a serious danger to Judaism, and declared that no such dialogue pursued. . . . Despite the opposition of a few Orthodox rabbis the Rav's position carried the day and almost without exception no dialogues have been conducted between Orthodox rabbis and the Catholic Church." [32] But, as is well known, the Rav, with his delicate balance between universalism and singularism, never opposed interfaith dialogue. What he opposed, as he states in "Confrontation," was interfaith theological dialogue. [33] He always, however, approved of interfaith dialogue about matters of general ethical and social concern. Again, this position comes out with particular force and clarity in the Rav's position paper, "On Interfaith Relationships." "We are . . . opposed to any public debate, dialogue or symposium concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic or ritual aspects of our faith vis-a-vis 'similar' aspects of another faith community When, however, we move from the private world of faith to the public world of humanitarian and cultural endeavors, communication among the various faith communities is desirable and even essential. We are ready to enter into dialogue on such topics as War and Peace, Poverty, Freedom, Man's Moral Values . . . Civil Rights, etc., which revolve about the religious spiritual aspects of our civilization. Discussion within these areas will, of course, be within the framework of our religious outlooks and terminology" (emphases added). [34]

In this connection, it is worth citing another "insider" view. The past president of the Rabbinical Council of America, Rabbi Bernard Rosensweig, who worked closely with the Rav on matters of communal policy, writes in his article "The Rav as Communal Leader": "The RCA remained loyal to the guidelines which the Rav had set down [concerning interfaith dialogue] and distinguished between theological discussions and ethical-secular concerns, which have universal validity. Every program involving either Catholic or Protestant churches in which we participated was carefully scrutinized. . . . Every topic which had possible theological nuances or implications was vetoed, and only when the Rav pronounced it to be satisfactory did we proceed to the dialogue." [35]

So much for R. Meiselman's claim that, in accordance with the Rav's position, "almost . . . no dialogues have been conducted between Orthodox rabbis and the Catholic Church."

R. Shalom Carmy, "On Orthodoxy and Revisionism," in First Things (2005)

The practical upshot of "Confrontation" is easily summarized. Jews must work together with representatives of the "religion of the many" when it comes to ethics and public policy. Moreover, "religious values, doctrines and concepts may be and have been translated into cultural categories enjoyed and cherished even by secular man." When we move, however, from the "cultural" manifestations of religion to the divine imperatives that characterize a faith community, these are incommensurate, particularistic and incommunicable: "dialogue" with respect to such doctrines as the election of Israel, the eternal authority of the Torah, the Trinity and the incarnation, are ill-advised and futile. As it is illegitimate for Jews to tailor their convictions to the expectations of the majority community, it is likewise "impertinent and unwise" for the community of the few to advise or solicit corresponding changes on the part of the "community of the many."

More than any single essay by Rabbi Soloveitchik, "Confrontation" has been the subject of polemical revisionism. Some project onto the Rav's conclusions their own unease with the Christian contribution to human spiritual culture. Others hypothesize that Jewish concerns about dialogue are no longer justified because Christianity is no longer supersessionist and the Rav—despite all evidence to the contrary—changed his mind, or would have had he kept up with developments.

Dr Eugene Korn, "Faith and Religious
Dialogues" Boston College Center for
Jewish-Christian Learning
Symposium of Rav Joseph Soloveitchik
- Interreligious Dialogue forty
Years Later (Nov 23, 2003)

R Soloveitchik's substantive arguments regarding interfaith dialogue appear in Part II of the essay to which I now turn. In that section he advances three different types of arguments that are interwoven throughout the discussion: (1) a philosophic argument about the nature and limits of human communication; (2) a doctrinal argument that assumes faithful Catholics are bound by specific theological claims regarding Jews and Judaism when engaging in interfaith dialogue; and (3) a historical argument based on Jewish attitudes conditioned by the painful historical experiences that Jews endured in their troubled relations with the Church.

Readers of R. Soloveitchik have claimed that this position is incoherent (6) First and foremost, R. Soloveitchik spent his entire life teaching Torah and halakha—Judaism's divine logos. His conception of God's word assumes it is logical and communicable to finite humans. In the tradition of Maimonides (7), we shall see that he believed that the Torah of God can be taught not only to Jews but also to Christians.

Second, according to his logic, it would seem that a Jew can no more successfully communicate his religious experience to another Jew than to a Christian. Yet R. Soloveitchik in fact attempted to communicate his religious experience to both Jews and Christians. His most famous and perhaps most personal theological confession, "The Lonely Man of Faith" was delivered to an interfaith audience at St. John's Catholic Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts (8). In that work, he takes up the generic human problem of interpersonal communication and concludes that Adam and Eve were able to communicate with each other because they formed a universal covenantal community with God—well before there was any idea of a particular covenant that separated Jews from gentiles.

The final argument of his critics notes that R. Soloveitchik read Christian and heterodox Jewish philosophers and theologians. He was deeply influenced by the Scholastics, Duns Scotus, Kant, Schleiermacher, Scheler, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Barth and Otto among others (9). His language and philosophy clearly indicate that these thinkers helped shape his experience of kedushah (holiness), teshuvah (repentance) and the texture of his religious life. How then could R. Soloveitchik claim in "Confrontation" that Jews and Christians should not talk to each other about the faith experience and logos because such dialogue was impossible, even "absurd." Of course it is a truism that subjective

I believe that these critiques are unfounded. R. Soloveitchik's dismissal of religious dialogue as absurd does not refer to the personal expression of faith, but to proof or refutation of faith. As an existentialist who believed that the deepest yearnings and satisfactions of human life were not intellectual, R. Soloveitchik maintained that the foundations of Jewish faith were located in the experience of the Jewish people, in the traditions of our patriarchs and in the personal life of individual Jews. What was absurd to him was any attempt at rational demonstration, scriptural analysis or logical deduction to prove or disprove faith. Perhaps this is why he frequently talked of Kierkegaard, but rarely of Anselm.

More to the point of "Confrontation," any interfaith discussion that utilized arguments to refute the faith of another is hostile and dishonest, not merely logically confused. The essay makes clear that R. Soloveitchik's primary objection—on both logical and moral grounds—was to doctrinal disputation between Christians and Jews regarding the validity of Judaism, i.e. the traditional Christian-Jewish debates imposed on Jews by the Church from Medieval times onward. This conclusion is strengthened by the list of topics "deemed improper" for dialogue that appeared in the 1966 statement formulated by R. Soloveitchik and adopted by the RCA. It is no accident that the list consists of the very subjects that were debated in medieval disputations (11) (11)

Dr Michael Wyszenograd, BC Symposium - Online Discussion

But if, in fact, there is no distinction, for the man of faith, between the secular and the sacred order, then how can we prescribe cooperation about secular but not about sacred matters? If Orthodox Jewish representatives sit down with church representatives to discuss nuclear war, poverty, abortion or any other "secular" issue, can the Orthodox Jew keep his faith out of the discussion? He can, I suppose, enumerate his position on those questions and refuse to discuss his reasons for holding those positions. But is that feasible? People have a right to know why I hold the position I do and I can only tell them by explaining my faith, my obedience to the written and oral Torah and the methods of exegesis I use to interpret these authoritative texts. It is simply not possible to split a Jew into two, demanding of him to keep what is most important about his very identity out of the dialogue. All Jewish values are ultimately rooted in revelation and to pretend otherwise is to play a charade which will convince no one. The option is whether to talk with Christians or not to talk with them. If we refuse to talk with them, we can keep theology and everything else out of the dialogue. If we do not refuse to talk with them, we cannot keep what is most precious to us out of the discussion.

Dr David Berger, BC Symposium

"Confrontation" is a characteristically brilliant, highly influential, and notoriously problematic work. While Rabbi Soloveitchik addresses a number of pragmatic issues clearly and to my mind presciently, he also makes an apparently unqualified assertion that matters of religious faith cannot in principle be communicated. Thus, interfaith dialogue should not and really cannot deal with theological issues. Its only proper subject is the realm of the secular order, expressed in the pursuit of social justice and related concerns.

As Dr Korn notes, serious readers have raised two fundamental and apparently insuperable objections to these formulations. First, the assertion of the intrinsic incommunicability of matters of faith leads to, or is already, a *reductio ad absurdum*. Great religious works have been written through the ages by members of disparate faiths, and Rabbi Soloveitchik himself read many of them. Indeed, he was influenced by many of them—and not just on the level that he describes as cultural, a level where even secular thinkers can "enjoy and cherish" religious insights. To make matters worse, he says that the individual "encounter between God and man" cannot even be communicated to another individual in the same faith community. Thus, theological discussion among Jews would also be impossible. Second, the much-quoted footnote that Dr. Korn describes as "the assumed Achilles heel" of "Confrontation" affirming that to the man of faith the so-called secular order is also sacred underscores the artificiality of any sharp division between theological and non-theological matters.

Great thinkers do not write transparent nonsense. They do sometimes engage in rhetorical hyperbole, and the more obvious it is that the literal understanding of a hyperbolic assertion cannot be intended, the more an author has the right to rely on the reader to understand this. But one must also be careful not to denude the rhetoric of all meaning, to the point where it says something so removed from its presumed intent that the formulation misses the point entirely.

Let me begin by conceding that Rabbi Soloveitchik was not entirely unconcerned by the residual problem of outright polemic. Dr Korn correctly notes that he uses the term debate at one point, and I agree that the term is revealing. It is also clear that Rabbi Soloveitchik assumed that he was dealing, even on the eve of *Nostra Aetate*, with a thoroughly supersessionist Catholicism whose adherents were interested in converting Jews. But I cannot agree that the full intent of "Confrontation" is

exhausted by depicting it as a warning against engaging in old-fashioned disputation. First of all, Jews did not need such a warning. Second, it was perfectly clear even in 1963 and 1964 that the call for dialogue was not framed in disputational terms. Indeed, that is precisely why Rabbi Soloveitchik had to caution against it. Thus, the preliminary text "On the Attitude of Catholics toward Non-Christians and especially toward Jews" distributed at the second session of the Council on November 8, 1963 declared that "since the Church has so much of a common patrimony with the synagogue, this Holy Synod intends in every way to promote and further mutual knowledge and esteem obtained by theological studies and fraternal discussions" (Arthur Gilbert, *The Vatican Council and the Jews*, p. 262). Third, Rabbi Soloveitchik provided guidance to the interfaith representatives of the Rabbinical Council of America for many years after *Nostra Aetate*. By then, it was perfectly evident that interfaith dialogue was not Barcelona-style disputation, that the parties were not engaging in medieval polemics about Isaiah 53 or the rationality of the incarnation. And yet Rabbi Soloveitchik, on the whole, held to his guidelines. The entire thrust of "Confrontation" is inspirational rhetoric about the private

This, I think, is the real thrust of R. Soloveitchik's position. Of course many elements of religious doctrine of the content of religious belief, can be conveyed. The assertion that the great encounter between God and man cannot be communicated, applied in the same breath even to individuals of the same faith, cannot mean that no theological discourse is possible. It means that the deepest levels of the faith experience are inaccessible to outsiders, and Rabbi Soloveitchik applies this to a collective of believers as well as to individuals. Thus, as much as theological propositions can be conveyed, as much as even religious emotions can be partially expressed, that which ultimately commits a person to God or a faith community to its particular relationship with God remains essentially private, leaving not only a lonely man of faith but a lonely people of faith—a nation that dwells alone.

Since Rabbi Soloveitchik believed that untrammeled interfaith dialogue presumes to enter into that realm, he declares it out of bounds. Even though dialogue among believers concentrating on social issues has a religious dimension, it does not presume to enter that innermost realm, and its value therefore outweighs its residual dangers. If I am correct,

The most basic self-interpretation of Judaism, it turns out, is therefore at stake. True, Judaism is not a missionary religion. We do not believe it to be God's will that all of humanity become Jewish. Gentiles who lead a basically moral life have a place in the world to come. But this does not mean that Judaism is indifferent to the fate of non-Jewish humanity. The election of Israel has as its purpose the salvation of all of humanity. If gentiles are bound by the Noahide covenant, how are they supposed to learn about this covenant except through theological dialogue with Israel? The Noahide covenant is not the natural law that Gentiles are supposed to discover by means of good thinking. It is a set of commandments (*mitzvot*) of the God of Israel and must be obeyed, at least according to one reading of Maimonides text, because they are commanded by God, otherwise obedience to them is of limited value. But how can Gentiles enter into relationship with the God of Israel except through contact with the people of Israel? The duty of Israel is to spread knowledge of the God of Abraham by word and deed and this cannot be accomplished by withdrawing behind thick pseudo walls and pretending the rest of the world does not exist. Of course there are dangers to dialogue, particularly when Jewish faith is weak and many Jews are in active flight from their God-chosen destiny. But the avoidance of all danger is not the solution; it is a repudiation of Israel's assignment.

Dr. Carmy

Nobody familiar with the full range of the Rav's published writings and lectures can deny that he found Christian thought helpful in working out and communicating his own ideas. It is simply impossible to follow him without considering his appreciation and critique of Kierkegaard, Otto, Scheler, Newman, Barth, Brunner, and Niebuhr among others. He differed from other contemporary rabbinic authorities not only in the breadth and depth of his intellectual life, but also in revealing these pursuits to the public. It is thus impossible to take his positive words about Christian cultural and intellectual creativity as mere politeness.

The Rav vividly perceived and articulated the intimacy between God and the individual and between God and His people. One cannot communicate to an outsider, without distortion and objectification, the secret life of Torah, its study and fulfillment, any more than a refined person would "dialogue" explicitly with friends and acquaintances about his most intimate family relations. Often, as with human love, precisely the unique gestures and turns of phrase that an outsider is liable to dismiss as insignificant are those that defy paraphrase and explanation. Modesty is not only a matter of external garb. It is a reticence about exposing human and communal singularity. Though some may find it ironic that the Rav could present this orientation in the language of Kierkegaard and Barth, his formulations are rooted in the traditional halakhic conception of Torah as part of a sacred covenant between God and Israel for which the conjugal image is a suitable metaphor. The Rav would probably have liked Auden's line: "Orthodoxy is reticence."

All this may sound absurd to those for whom the theological singularity of Jewish existence and Torah is at best an intellectual formula rather than a vivid, pervasive experience, and it is alien to a compulsively talkative culture that sees reticence as an obstacle to overcome. Clearly there are situations when speaking of private matters to outsiders, or in public, is vulgar and degrading. Yet even refined people sometimes allow friends and acquaintances, themselves excluded from their lonely communion, some measure of access to their intimate lives. Such attempts at communication, however inadequate, are often dignified and valuable and useful. The fully "orthodox," who have internalized the Rav's attitude to Torah and Jewish singularity and share Auden's esteem for reticence, may require fewer reminders and constraints. Policy, however, requires general guidelines. Though no rigid set of guidelines can prescribe the appropriate behavior and nuance for every case, the Rav undertook to provide them.

Erica Brown - BC Symposium Online Discussion

(he may have had little choice given his audience) People brought up in faith communities learn to adapt their logical faculties to the tenets of their religion on the unarticulated premise (to borrow an expression) that the over-examined life may not always be worth living. While we might seek to ground faith in the anchors of rationality, believers of all religions understand that belief ultimately transcends reason.

Rabbi Soloveitchik charges that attempts to understand the inner logic of another faith are "absurd." This harsh word is picked apart by Dr. Korn, who claims that this position is "incoherent." Korn cites the fact that Rabbi Soloveitchik did address interfaith audiences and did believe that expressions of faith could be articulated, proximately if not exactly. Dr. Korn then claims that, "What was absurd to him was any attempt at rational demonstration, scriptural analysis or logical deduction to prove or disprove faith." This statement, in light of Lasker's observations, requires further edification. Can we confidently say that Rabbi Soloveitchik's word choice is limited to spheres of logical deduction or rational demonstration alone? Faith is sculpted less through doctrine and dogma than through the nuances of behavior and ritual, custom and history. The word absurd may seem harsh but unequivocally communicates what authenticity seems to demand. No, we cannot organically understand other faiths, nor can books, lectures or inter-faith dialogue communicate the truths of a religion with adequacy. We may use the portals of history, literature or other scholarship to learn about another religion, but dialogue implies talking to and not talking past or looking over the artifacts of another person's treasured beliefs.

R. Jonathan Sacks, BC Symposium -
Online Discussion

It may therefore come as a surprise that I believe Rabbi Soloveitchik was right in his essay, "Confrontation," and that I have taken it as my guide throughout. To be sure, he used the word "incommunicable." I prefer the word "incommensurable." This term will be familiar to readers of the late Sir Isaiah Berlin.

The great faiths constitute different languages of perception, imagination and sensibility. They are only partially translatable into one another. This is a matter of degree. The various Latin-based languages have something in common, as do the Semitic tongues, ancient and modern. The same applies to religions. The Abrahamic monotheisms are more closely related to one another than they are to the mysticisms of the East.

Nonetheless, each is distinct. Each has its own resonances and nuances of meaning.

Another way of approaching it is to be found within Judaism itself. According to Maimonides, *mitzvot Bein adam la-Makom* (commands between man and God) require a blessing. Those between persons (*bein adam le-chaver*) do not. Following a suggestion of Rabbi Yitzhak Remes (he put it somewhat differently, but the point is the same), the reason for the distinction is that for commands between the person and God, the essential element is the intentional act (*psulach*). That intention must be made explicit in the form of a blessing, which constitutes a mental dedication of the act as one of service to God. As for commands between persons, what is essential is not the intentional act but its effect (*niflah*); thus no declaration of intent is necessary. Joining together to ameliorate the human condition is the meta-mitzvah "between man and man" and thus is unaffected by the specific religious reasons that lead us to acts of compassion and generosity, or the several narratives of which they are a part.

bring us to authentic dialogue about our belief systems. And why must we talk about it? The work that Jews, Christians and Muslims have to do together to ameliorate the world will bring us together repeatedly in conversation. Christians may need to make theological space for Jews before partnering with them in the work of the world, but that conversation is largely an internal one and one that is gratefully taking place now. We do have a lot to talk about. It is the talk of compassion and charity; it is the cement of a Western society aching for moral guidance and belonging. Excuse my naive simplicity, but isn't that enough to talk about? Do we need to talk so much? In terms of Rabbi Soloveitchik, we can thank him for provoking this commentary. At the same time, the