

The Only Jew There ... Sort of

Phillip J. Bentley

I was asked by Stella, a woman from Uganda, why Jews do not approve of intermarriage. My answer was that she would understand it best if she saw it not in terms of religion but of tribe. I explained that in fact religion is not a Jewish concept, but is an idea invented by the Romans. She understood because her tribal language, like Hebrew, has no word for "religion." (The Hebrew word *dat* is borrowed from Persian, and its only use in the entire Bible is in Haman's description of us.) What we might call religion is really part of our total way of life, not a separate thing.

This conversation took place at a remarkable meeting which I attended and in which I had a special role. It was the quadrennial council meeting of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) and a seminar called "Beyond the 500 Years" which was held jointly with SERPAY-AL, a Latin American human rights group whose founder, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, won the Nobel Peace Prize about ten years ago.

I attended as one of three official American delegates and, less officially, in my capacity as president of the Jewish affiliate of FOR/USA, the Jewish Peace Fellowship. Among 120 people from over forty nations I was the only Jew there ... sort of.

IFOR was founded in 1919 in Holland as an umbrella for the fellowships that had formed on the eve of and during the First World War. England and Germany had been followed first by the United States and then by other European nations. These were Christian fellowships devoted to the idea that an essential function of Christianity is peacemaking.

For over twenty years these were purely Christian groups, but in 1941, when the draft was enacted, Jewish conscientious objectors were forced to turn to the Quakers to support them in their applications for CO status. Rabbi Abraham Cronbach, Rabbi Isidore Hoffman,

and Jane Evans created a Jewish Peace Fellowship to meet their needs. Over time in the United States other non-Christian groups were founded including, Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim.

In the meantime IFOR was accepting branches and affiliates in such places as India, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Japan, and Hong Kong. It became something of an embarrassment to have a nation like India represented solely by Christians, especially since the most famous pacifist in this century was a Hindu. IFOR began to see that if it was really to become a worldwide religious peace movement it could not be exclusively Christian. FOR/USA is the most truly multifaith branch, with its seventeen separate religious branches. For the past few meetings FOR/USA has made a point of including a Jew and a Buddhist in its official delegation. At the last two meetings I was the Jew.

During the summer of 1988 the meeting was in Assisi, Italy. The first night of the meeting the various branches gave brief reports. The man reporting for India said it was sad that so few Hindus and Moslems had joined. At this an Indian woman who was there as an expert on Gandhi, a Hindu who always wore a sari and the spot as her third eye, said, "Perhaps if your application did not refer to peace-making as a Christian vocation you might have more non-Christian members." That first day happened to be Tisha Be-Av, and I had asked to lead the morning devotions. Since there were no copying facilities, I had to create something which people from many backgrounds could be part of. After a few words about Tisha Be-Av I began to sing, "By the waters, the waters of Babylon..." And soon found many of them singing not only with me but in canon. This was the start of my role as Jewish song leader and storyteller. Every story and almost every song was new to them, but they learned and listened with enthusiasm. Of course some of them already had some Jewish connections. Once a German woman named Gerlinda walked up to me and started singing "*Veyuhudah le-olam teyshev ...*," wanting me to sing in canon with her. I never did find out where she had learned such a song. When some people wanted me to lead Israeli dancing, I apologized, saying I could not dance, sing, and teach dancing all at once. The next thing I knew, some Swiss people had brought out a stereo and put on a tape of Israeli dance music, and I found myself learning a new Israeli dance in French!

At times I felt compelled to defend the Jewish name. Once, during a lecture being delivered in French, the speaker referred to Jesus' turning over the tables of the money-changers in the Temple as an example of righteous anger. The English simultaneous translator said, "money-lenders." My hand was the first up for questions. The translator was most embarrassed, especially since the speaker had said "money-changers." It jogged his consciousness up a notch.

On a free half-day in Assisi we happened to walk into a souvenir shop on the main plaza which sold Nazi paraphernalia. Now this was a very strange thing to see in Assisi, which was a center of anti-Nazi resistance and is famous for the many Jewish lives saved by the "Assisi underground." The shopkeeper said she stocked these items only because people bought them. Some of the Europeans sat down in front of the shop and arranged for a meeting with the mayor. When I heard about this I asked why they had not invited me to join them. They told me they wanted this to be Christian Europeans protesting, because they saw it as their problem to fix. Shortly after the meeting ended, the town passed an ordinance against such things being sold there.

In 1992, at the next meeting, in Quito, multifaith was again given a place on the agenda. Again, it was not easy. Most of the Europeans were fairly open to the idea, but many of the Africans and Asians were missionaries or missionary-taught. To them it was hard to see multifaith as extending beyond other Christian denominations, and I suspect some of them had trouble stretching it that far. This was not out of any innate bigotry, but simply due to lack of experience and knowledge. These were the most spiritually generous people I have ever known.

They felt perfectly comfortable asking me about some of the outrageous things they had heard about Jews. I had to respond to an indigenous woman who told our translator that her priest had said that Jews are Christ-killing demons. This was after a wonderful afternoon in a small-town cemetery on El Dia de Muerte. She could see I was no demon! I had a little talk with the regional bishop the next day. One of the Africans asserted that Jews run the economies of all of the industrialized nations. He even thought that Ross Perot was Jewish! I had a little talk with him too.

I was asked to organize and lead a Shabbat celebration on Friday

night as my contribution to faith-sharing. I had two people to help me who had been born Jews but no longer practiced it. One was Paula, the sister of a very famous rabbi, who practices Buddhism (although she is a fierce advocate of Jewish causes in IFOR). The other was Daniel, who was born into the Bene Israel in Bombay, but became a Gandhian Hindu. This service included many of the basics of Shabbat eve and emphasized the Jewish tradition of peace-making.

Christian worship and song-leading was often a problem. Once a South African taught us a very catchy song which we all sang and danced to for some time before he announced that the Zulu words mean, "Christ is our savior." At the Sunday morning Christian worship I expected Christian themes and references, but was taken aback at the choice of New Testament scripture which spoke of breaking down the walls between Jews and gentiles and bringing all into Christ. It turned out that the person who had suggested the reading had a translation that did not mention Jews, so that it read as a call for breaking down walls between people; a more traditional (and more accurate!) translation was used instead. On the other hand, when bread and wine were given out, it was made clear that this was not to be a eucharist but a sharing among many different kinds of people.

There were two programs on multifaith concerns. In one I spoke out about the need for sensitivity if we are to be truly a welcoming multifaith world movement. At a small discussion session I learned of some remarkable experiences. Brother Jarlath from Bangladesh spoke of his adoption of Islam as a second faith because he had learned to appreciate what it has to offer him spiritually, even though he is a faithful Christian brother. Rudolphe, a Christian teacher from Madagascar, spoke of his multifaith programs with Hindus, Moslems, and adherents of tribal religions.

It was also interesting to hear Brother Jarlath speak of intermarriage as a problem for Bangla Christians, who are a tiny minority there. They have the same kinds of concerns about it as American Jews!

Various people came to me to consult on Jewish matters. There was the German who asked whether we could get American Jews involved in providing solidarity with foreigners in Germany who are being attacked by Neo-Nazis and skinheads. There was the Italian woman who wanted to discuss the idea of *teshuvah* as compared



Rabbi Phillip J. Bentley leads a Shabbat Service at a meeting of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR)

(Courtesy of Rabbi Phillip J. Bentley)

with Christian ideas of atonement. A French priest gave me a tape of a Latin American folk mass and asked me to send him a tape of Jewish liturgical music.

Most remarkable of all was Gonzalo Santacruz, a Spaniard whom I met while touring old Quito with my friend and roommate Konrad Lubbert (a Lutheran pastor from Hamburg who works for reconciliation with Jews, has spent time in Israel, and knows a fair amount of Hebrew). We were walking down a market street toward the church of St. Francis when this elderly man with long salt-and-pepper hair approached us and asked where we were from. If we were going to St. Francis, he was too and would be glad to show us around (we figured he would want a tip, but nothing costs much down there). He did show us around, and then he suddenly asked Konrad (in Spanish) if he knew Hebrew. Konrad said yes, but pointed to me, saying I knew more since I was a rabbi. Immediately Gonzalo chanted *Hariu* from beginning to end. He then asked for a piece of paper and stick-printed the *Sh'ma* with vowels. He told us that the local rabbi was a friend and he was studying Hebrew with him. He proudly announced that he knew over 200 Hebrew words.

What about Israel? These were people who were concerned with the wounds of the Jewish people and of Israelis, and also with those of the Palestinian people. Yes, they were critical of many Israeli policies, but they were also critical of Arab terrorism. The organization had just had a meeting with top PLO officials in Tunis, including Arafat, to discuss the importance of turning to exclusively nonviolent struggle. (It may well be that this meeting was one of the events that finally brought the PLO to the peace table.)

Israel, in fact the Middle East, was represented by only one man, Kamil Shehade, a self-described Palestinian Christian Arab Israeli. He is a wonderful human being who believes that Israelis and Palestinians need each other and that their future depends on each other. He is not, by a long shot, the only Palestinian who feels this way. This despite harassment and persecution at the hands of the Israeli police and military, who had trouble understanding a Palestinian with his beliefs. However, he has learned not to let his anger rule him.

Finally a word on tribalism. Tribalism can produce what we see in Somalia and Bosnia, but it can have a positive side. Isaac Bashevis

Singer said it, Elie Weisel says it: we cannot love humanity unless we know who we are. Rafael, an Amazon Indian who addressed us, said it most eloquently. There is no such thing as a primitive people. No people is better than another. Each has its own civilization, its own technology. We can learn from each other and share with each other, respecting each other and recognizing our common humanity. There is a lesson for us in this. Being strong about our Jewishness does not mean turning our backs on the rest of humanity. Being enthusiastic about humanity does not mean we need to forget our Jewishness. We need both sides of the coin to know how to do the right thing. As Hillel taught, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me; but if I am for myself only, what am I; and if not now, when?"

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