Judaism and Christianity: Towards Reconciliation

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I would like to start today with a story, a somewhat well known story retold by M. Scott Peck about a monastery, a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house; the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut where a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. The monks always knew when the rabbi was home when they saw the smoke from his fire rise above the treetops. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained that purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well, what did the rabbi say"

"He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving—it was something cryptic—was that the messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbis' words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the messiah. Oh God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the messiah. And on the off off chance that each monk himself might be the messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

It is a beautiful story. But why did I choose it? I have been thinking a lot about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in preparation for the Sunday morning class I'll be teaching this year starting on October 27th. And with that in mind, this story jumped out at me. There was something wrong about it that did not sit right with me. Think about what that might be. But first let's talk about what's right with the story.

It is a story that is often told in groups to foster mutual respect and dignity. If any group or enterprise wants to succeed, the fundamental element is belief in oneself and one's partners. But going deeper than that, the story reminds us that everyone one of us is an echo of God, as we would say, created in God's image. And the story reminds us as well that ordinary people can achieve greatness if they believe in themselves and those around them. For these reasons, the story is told, and you can find multiple versions of it on the internet by searching under its title, "The Rabbi's Gift."

The original author of the story is unknown, but I believe it must be of Jewish provenance. I say this because, first of all, it would be unusual to read a Christian story in which monks found their salvation through the wisdom of the local rabbi. And the idea that anyone might be the messiah fits into a genre of Jewish imagination. Some of us have been to a brit milah officiated at by Cantor Wasser from Fair Lawn Jewish Center, who, in explaining the reference to Elijah the prophet, always says that it is possible that this new baby might be the messiah. While our story might be understood through the lens of modernity where both the Jewish and Christian houses of worship have declined, I detect an element of Jewish counter-history in this narrative. Counter-history is a literary tool often employed as a defensive measure by minority cultures to turn things around where theirs is seen as the superior culture, and the majority culture as the inferior culture. The classic example of this in the Bible is Book of Esther read on Purim. Since we talked about Hanukkah last night, why not mention Purim today? But think about the Book of Esther: the Jew Mordecai becomes the prime minister whereas Haman, the original prime minister, is first ridiculed in public and then hung. Rather than suffer through a bloody anti-Jewish action, the Jews raise arms and defeat their enemies. Esther is a Jewish fantasy, read with love by Jews through centuries of persecution and powerlessness.

In this story, "The Rabbi's Gift," the counter-reality is that the monks are lost while the rabbi is spiritual master. This is not a reversal from the Jewish perspective, but it is in the story since the monks recognize the rabbi as their spiritual superior. That is, it would be natural for Jews to think of themselves as spiritually superior and for Christians to think of themselves as spiritually superior. Why we need to compete on these matters is a greater question, but competition is a part of human nature. But what is striking here is that the monks seem to recognize that the rabbi is their spiritual superior. The fact that the rabbi goes to spend some time in a hut by himself, a hermitage, is something monkish, another striking reversal, but is necessary in order to establish the holiness of the rabbi in the eyes of the monks. That the

abbot and the rabbi study scripture together is somewhat fantastical, but the most striking element is that the monks should believe the old rabbi who tells them that one of them is the messiah.

The fantasy nature of these counter-realities is revealed by the story's brief return to reality, when we are told that the rabbi and the abbot embrace each other, and the abbot says, "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years." Of course Jews and Christians lived together in the same small towns in Europe across the centuries. And of course each culture recognized the other and reacted to each other's presence. But the distance remained. Here they lived together all these years, but not only had they never studied together before, they had never even met before! This acknowledgment of the distance between Judaism and Christianity, or rather, between Jewry and Christendom, is a rude awakening amidst what is otherwise a fairy tale.

Of course, in the world today we are building bridges between the religious communities to realize the fantasy described here. I spoke last night about the interfaith community we have built here in Ridgewood and how the menorah question was approached through that context of religious and cultural diversity. Interfaith dialogue between clergy here on the local level is something that I have found myself devoting time to, and so I have also been giving it a lot of thought. When I agreed to chair our interfaith clergy association, I decided that our monthly meetings needed to be about more than just coordinating interfaith services and other Village business. We also needed to study and learn from each other. And so at each meeting I always ask the host of that meeting to teach something about his or her house of worship or denomination. I've learned a great deal about the different Christian denominations, as well as Islam and Hinduism. And last year, Ridgewood's clergy gathered in Temple Israel's sukkah as I passed around the lulav and etrog. This kind of dialogue happens on the local level and is matched by dialogue between the leadership of the religions and denominations on a scale today that has never happened before. My colleague Rabbi Noam Marans, a former rabbi of this congregation, serves as the Director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations for the American Jewish Committee, and in that capacity he has

met with the pope and other religious leaders from across the world. I am very happy to announce now that, fitting into our adult education course theme of the year of Christianity and Judaism, we have invited Rabbi Marans back to Temple Israel to be a scholar-in-residence for a Shabbat, where he will teach us about Jewish-Christian relations today from his perspective. Please join us on November 22nd and 23rd for a very special Shabbat at Temple Israel.

The dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, though, is more than just friendly get-togethers. We have a complex shared history. Too much Jewish pain and suffering have been caused by anti-Jewish hatreds, antisemitism, fueled, in part, by the portrayal of the Jews in the New Testament as the Christ-killers. While I have known Rabbi Marans for a long time, we got to know each other better when we travelled together to the German town of Oberammergau three years ago to see and dialogue about the Passion Play, the town's continuation every ten years of the medieval tradition of a play about the suffering and execution of Jesus. The problem with these plays is that they always displayed the Jews as the bad guys. The Oberammergau production, though, was sensitive to all of these concerns, and they worked hard to portray Jesus as a Jew and a rabbi, acknowledging modern scholarship on the complexities of first century Judean society. The director was keenly aware that productions in that same town were personally witnessed by Adolf Hitler, and so he committed the current production to celebrate Judaism by having his actors read from a Torah on the stage, sing the Shema, and bringing them to Israel, not only to visit the sites of the Passion narrative, but also to visit Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem. And yet, despite all of these gestures, there is still the unavoidable fact that the New Testament does point its finger at the Jews for their failure to accept Jesus as the messiah and role in his condemnation. That rejection of the Christian community was memorialized in the Christian scriptures. They are a reflection more of the historical circumstances of Christianity's split from Judaism than of the story of Jesus himself, and yet, it is still there, despite the Catholic Church's famous 1965 statement that the Jewish people are not responsible for the crucifixion and that antisemitism is a sin.

Two thousand years of bitterness and violent hatred cannot be so easily erased, even by a papal decree. Especially when six million were lost in Europe, the continent built on the foundation of Christian culture.

It is appropriate on Yom Kippur to reflect on forgiveness. Asking for forgiveness is hard, but is easier than granting it. Feeling remorse about our wrongdoings is one thing. Letting go of the pain is something else. That is why tradition gives the wronged three chances to forgive. And as hard as it can be to forgive someone who caused me pain, I should ultimately be able to do so because it is my own pain, so I can decide, at some point, to move on beyond the hurt. But it is more complicated when the pain, the wrong, was not directed at me personally by another individual, but directed by a group against another group. How can I individually forgive others for the pain they caused to the Jewish people as a whole? And how can we collectively, as a people, forgive others for what others did to our people in the past? These are questions that surround German-Jewish relations, which we have discussed before. They are also relate to the question of how Jews can or should respond to the challenge of contemporary interfaith dialogue with Christianity.

I have been deeply influenced by an essay addressing these philosophical questions written by Rabbi Elliot Dorff, the rector of the American Jewish University and chairman of the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Rabbi Dorff explains that first of all, forgiveness is not the same a forgetting. As he writes, "Forgiveness does not entail that either the perpetrator or the victim forgets the wrongdoing. On the contrary, part of the moral regeneration required in justifying forgiveness is that the culprit recognizes the violation…the victim also remembers the hurt." Rabbi Dorff explains that when God grants us atonement on Yom Kippur our wiped clean, which is what *kippur* means. "God may still do that," Rabbi Dorff writes, "but human beings do not. When one human being forgives another, the victim agrees to engage in present and future relationships with the perpetrator *despite* the wrong committed; the act itself continues to be considered wrong by the victim—and, if the process of repentance works, by the perpetrator too." Rabbi Dorff also points out how striking it is that our tradition

chose Jonah as the haftarah for this afternoon, a book about the challenges of forgiving the Ninevites, a non-Jewish nation who were responsible for the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel, for the "Ten Lost Tribes of Israel" getting lost. And yet even they are capable of repentance. Forgiveness, Rabbi Dorff teaches, is not about forgetting, about rebuilding a relationship, what we call reconciliation.

That is why interfaith dialogue begins with clergy having breakfast together, as we do once a month in Ridgewood. Reconciliation is effected by getting to know each other, again, which begins with breaking bread together. It is as if we are pressing the reset button. Whether Presidents Obama and Putin can do that, time will tell. But we can do it with our neighbors. With our families.

The building block of any relationship, as we all know, is getting to know each other which we do through listening to each other and learning about each other. Any first date that takes place in the world is always a conversation about who each person is, in a condensed version. The way relationships can be restored, then, is by listening again. By getting to know each other, by understanding each other, by recognizing our differences and embracing our individualities. Only then can we work beyond the hurt we may have caused each other and achieve reconciliation.

I said how part of my mission as chair of the interfaith association is for the clergy to learn from each other. That circle of learning needs to expand beyond the clergy. I have an idea, which I have shared in initial outline with my clergy colleagues, that we have a travelling open door worship service, so that say, over a three-year period, there will be one service a month at a different house of worship each month that is open to all everyone in Ridgewood, but not an interfaith service, just an open service at a specific house of worship. So that we would experience a church service at each of the churches, a Muslim service, a Hindu service, and our friends would come here for a Jewish service. There will be no watering down, no plastic displays, but an embrace of the unique voice of each tradition. We would attend not as worshippers but as guests, as friends having come to experience our neighbors' homes. Only then can we really learn about each other, and only then can we expect to be fully understood.

It was along the same lines that I decided, in consultation with our adult ed committee, to pick Judaism and Christianity as the topic for this year's Sunday morning history series. Because I found that while Christianity is all around us, and that so much of Judaism has evolved in the context of Christian culture, we understand so little about Christianity itself, needless to say, of how the Jewish-Christian relationship had gone so wrong in the past. By learning about that, by understanding how the pain came about, we will be in a better place to continue beyond it.

So let us return to the story called "The Rabbi's Gift." What is wrong with the story? What bothered me about it? The superiority of the rabbi over the monks, his wisdom contrasted to their naivety, alerted me that the story could only have been written by a Jew. But looking deeper, the real problem with the story hit me. While the writer revealed his or her perspective by making the monks out to be naïve, it is the writer who shows the real naivety, because, think about it, if they were real monks, would they be going around wondering which one of them is the messiah? If they were true *Christ*ian monks, then they would have known exactly who the messiah was! We, as Jews, are the ones who don't know, or at least we know who it is not! There is no more fundamental difference between the two religions than that!

If reconciliation is to take place, we must start by understanding each other, even a little better. We have to hear each other. We have to listen. And then we can also speak.

Gamar hatimah tovah, may God grant us atonement, and may we make peace with those around us. Amen.