

MATOS (NUMBERS 30:2-36:13)

The Pope and the Designated Hitter

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

(This article appeared, in abbreviated form, as an op/ed in the Jewish Press. The article went on to be misquoted in several languages in Catholic Blogs and websites all over the world. Lots of Catholics now love me and agree with me, and some despise me; and both groups do so for the same reason – because they have totally misinterpreted what I wrote!! :-))

Oh, man, are they ever angry!

Normally I don't pay much attention to interdenominational relationships within Christendom. I am neither Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran nor Episcopalian, and have never been particularly concerned as to the theological similarities and differences, and how well the leaders of these groups get along.

However, the news report on the radio yesterday morning was hard to miss. It seems that the Pope has decided to make it clear that unless you're a Catholic, you're not a real Christian. Your Church doesn't qualify as a real church. If you're Orthodox, (as in Russian- or Greek-) you're better than nothing, but you're still not Plan A! But the Protestants, as far as the Pope is concerned, simply don't make the grade!

And with that, over 40 years of ecumenical dialogue go down the tubes. Protestant leaders are offended as a result of being "dissed" by the Pope. The churches whose founders long ago broke away from the Catholic Church feel that they are considered less-than-Christian by an institution that they previously rejected as "too Christian."

No doubt, in short order, a multitude of Jewish leaders will express their concern over the Pontiff's lack of tolerance for those who believe differently than he. After all, a spirit of cooperation fostered by the Second Vatican Council back in 1965 has allowed people of diverse faiths to share their beliefs in mutual respect. Among the reforms of Vatican II was the dropping of the Latin Mass which includes a Good Friday prayer for the conversion of the Jews. Why, we have even seen the fascinating phenomenon of bishops, in full "uniform", visiting the study halls of Jewish universities to observe the study of Talmud. How could the Pope jeopardize this détente with his bigoted condemnation of non-Catholics?

I have one thing to say to the Bishop of Rome: "Hear, hear!" After all, what do you want from the man? He's got a religion to run!

I, for one, am not at all put off by the fact that the leader of another religion sees that religion as primary. If he thinks his religion is right, he obviously thinks that my religion is wrong. And that's o.k. Because he's wrong!!

I've always found it curious that different religions and branches thereof get together in a spirit of harmony to share their common faiths. By definition, these people should have strong opposition to the beliefs of their "colleagues" at the table. The mode of prayer of one group SHOULD be an affront to the other group. Yet, for some reason it isn't. Why is that?

My feeling, and it is not a very politically correct one, is that the reason many diverse religious groups find it easy to pray together is that they don't really believe very strongly in what they are doing!

If my religion is okay and your religion is okay, we can mix and match and share with mutual respect and admiration. What the Pope is saying, and I agree 100%, is that there are irreconcilable differences, and we can't pretend those differences don't exist.

Christians believe that we are all sinners and that there is only one way to achieve salvation. It starts with believing that the Messiah arrived about 2000 years ago. I don't believe that premise to be correct. I can't. Such a belief is, based upon the teachings of the Torah, theologically indefensible. (That's a nice way of saying that I believe it is wrong.)

The Pope believes I am wrong. If he didn't, he wouldn't be much of a Catholic. And that's okay. He can believe whatever he wants. He just happens to be wrong.

G-d said to Moses ... "Speak to the Israelites, and tell them, 'When you will cross the Jordan into the Land of Canaan... you must destroy all their carved stones, and demolish all their cast metal idols and high altars ...'" (Numbers, 30: 50-53)

Hmmm. Not very tolerant of the Canaanite faith, are we? G-d ordered us to destroy every vestige of idol worship. We were not to show any respect for the beliefs of the previous inhabitants of the Land. Why? Because their beliefs were an anathema to the G-d of Israel. "Oh, would you like to have a joint prayer meeting? Cool. We'll do G-d, and you can do Baal!" I don't think so!

One of the closest friends of Israel in recent years was Jerry Falwell. Rev. Falwell organized Christian trips to Israel and garnered support in Congress for the Jewish State. Many questioned his sincerity. After all, they reasoned, he just wants us all to convert!

My attitude toward Falwell was a very practical one. As a fundamentalist Christian, he probably didn't hold out much hope for my ultimate salvation in view of my rejection of his messiah. He would probably have advised me to arrange to be buried in something fireproof! And that's okay. I might have advised him to do the same! :-) I don't require my Christian neighbor to respect my religious beliefs. His beliefs are his business; my beliefs are mine. Let's work together for Israel and justice, and leave religion out of the conversation. Don't worry about my soul; just supply to protection of our bodies; we'll worry about our own souls, thank you.

Protestants are PROTESTants because their founders PROTESTED against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. They changed the rules and now they expect the Catholics to endorse the change as acceptable! (I've often had the same problem with designated hitters in baseball. The National League should tell the American League. "Hey, you guys changed the rules. You want to play baseball with a real baseball team? Good. Teach your pitcher how to hold a bat!")

If you believe in something, if you really believe in something, you need to have the courage of your convictions and stand up for what you believe. I can respect the Pope for making an unambiguous statement of what he believes.

A major crisis in America, and especially Israel today is the conversion issue. A large proportion of Russian immigrants to Israel are not Jewish but claim to be so. There are those in Israel who feel that the Rabbinate needs to streamline the conversion process to accommodate the needs of these people to assimilate into Israeli society. They feel that the Rabbinate is not sufficiently sensitive to the fact that these are people who are not interested in meeting the requirements of Jewish Law to become Jews. Therefore, they reason, if the bar is too high, simply lower the bar.

This works if you view Jewish Law as a system of old-world customs fabricated by some rabbis as a nice cultural experience. Then, if the cultural needs change, simply change the cultural customs.

The only problem is that Jewish Law is not a quaint collection of good deeds. It is G-d's instructions to us on how He expects us to live our lives. And all of the political correctness in the world won't allow us to ignore irreconcilable differences.

We need to respect all people. After all, they are all created in G-d's image. That does not mean, however, that we have to respect their opinions. Nor does it mean that we should go around trashing the beliefs of other people. That is not the way we bring peace and harmony to the world. It means that we don't need to play games of "I'm okay, you're okay" with beliefs we find unacceptable.

An interesting individual to the Jewish community is Cardinal Lustiger of Paris. Lustiger is another one of the many casualties of the Holocaust. A Jewish child who was hidden with Catholics during the war, he converted to Catholicism at the age of thirteen. His mother died in Auschwitz. He still refers to the Jewish People as “we” and he says Kaddish for his mother. What a tragedy! If he showed up in my Shul to say Kaddish, we wouldn’t count him as one of the ten men for the Minyan. It’s not that he’s not Jewish; he surely is. But I would not be permitted to count him in the Minyan because he is an apostate; he has turned his back on G-d’s Torah. It is a terrible situation, but religiously, we have nothing to say to that man.

[A few weeks after this article was written, Lustiger passed away. Included in his Roman Catholic funeral mass was the recital of Kaddish. How sad.]

It also doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be talking to Catholic leaders. The Pope needs to know, for example, that it is good to encourage his close to a billion followers that it is good to support Israel and it is bad to hate Jews. There needs to be careful dialogue, but it needs to be a secular, common needs-based dialogue. There has been work on issues pertaining to certain legislation. But no, we should not be praying together and we should not be studying Talmud together.

A Catholic doctor once came to visit me in my office. One of my congregants told him what I had said in a sermon about the murder of pre-born children, and he determined that he and I were on the same page. He invited me to participate in a symposium on abortion, to be made up of doctors, lawyers, and clergy. He was specifically looking for non-Catholics. “After all,” he reasoned, “we orthodox people have to stick together!”

I declined the invitation.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz