Jews and Others: The Responses

The lively exchanges of the past two weeks on the subject of “Jews and Others” stimulated thoughts, memories, and suggestions that I’d like to share to keep the conversation on this crucial matter going strong.

Catharine’s story of studying the Shema’ with Christians called to mind an experience when a JTS group visited a center for Catholic pilgrims in Israel near the Sea of Galilee. A young priest, strumming a guitar, sang out the Shema’—and my immediate response was a mix of wonderment and horror. “You can’t do that,” I wanted to say. “You can’t have that. It’s my faith credo!” I knew, even as the thought first entered consciousness, that Christians, too, include the Shema’ passage with the rest of Torah, and what we call Hebrew Bible, in their Holy Scripture. They consider themselves “Israel.” The Christian embrace of Torah has had a major, complex, and not-always-positive impact on Jews and on the world. Jews have lived for most of our history as Others to Christians and Muslims—groups far more numerous and powerful than the Jewish communities among them. There was little conversation across those divides over many centuries, except among small elites of intellectuals. Disputation and forced conversion were far more common than dialogue.

So when a Christian chants the Shema’ before a Jewish group with full respect and without any intent to convert us, or when Catharine studies the Shema’ with Christian clergy in a similar spirit, something new and important has broken into the history of relations among religious groups. I refuse to be cynical about the outcome of such dialogue. It needs to be nurtured at every opportunity.

Brian’s point about how unsatisfactory it is for Jews to refer to the world’s many cultures, faiths, and nations as “Gentiles” or “non-Jews” put me in mind of discussions I had at Stanford with “Asian-American” students about how absurd they found that category. Japan, Korea, and China, they informed me, have engaged for centuries in a cultural, economic, and political rivalry—yet there they were, along with at least a dozen other cultural and linguistic groups, lumped together by a largely white university and by government affirmative action legislation—and so by faculty and fellow students—in a label they could not wear comfortably. I could relate. I have often bristled at being described via categories like “white,” “white male,” and “religious,” which seem to leave out most of what I think defines me.
We perform these acts of labeling, I think, because we need to make sense of the world and some sense, even if distorted, seems better than none. Jews like me are aware of all that we are missing when we ignore differences among individuals or groups by settling for umbrella terms like “Gentile.” The other primary function of such categories is to sustain the internal Jewish sense of self by insisting that the boundary separating some 15 million people on one side of the line (Jews), from several billion on the other (everyone else), is worth preserving. Fuzzier and more porous borders (as between Jews and other monotheists, or between the “Jewish” sides of Jewish selves and all the other sides) are better for some purposes. The point I was making in my posting required the boundary I drew.

I’m grateful to Brian, Claudia, and Eric for pointing out how problematic such dividing lines can be for converts who live on both sides of them. The tensions you three feel and live can generate crucial lessons for the Jewish communities of which you are a part. We all tend to shut people out, and shut ideas out, lest they challenge us more than we wish to be challenged. You will resist this tendency and perhaps can help the rest of us resist it too. I treasured Aaron’s stories of what he learned from the individuals he encountered in hospital chaplaincy—and why it is important to confront others fully as who we are: Jews substantively different by dint of that commitment from members of other groups. “We put wheels on our theology and roll into a world that needs us to show up.” Exactly.

The “chosen people” idea, for better and for worse, is at the heart of that theology. (Most important things in life, I find, operate both for better and for worse. This is a feature of our humanity that transcends every division I know.) To David, who posted on this last week: I wrote my dissertation and first book on the subject of chosenness because it perplexed American Jewish thinkers from the 1930s through the 1960s more than any other theological theme—and has always perplexed me. Judaism, I have concluded, can’t live without the idea but has to avoid the temptations to chauvinism, racism, and intolerance to which it and similar notions have frequently led religious leaders and teachers, including Jews.

Space does not permit extensive discussion of how I understand the idea of the “chosen people.” Suffice it to say that I hope Jews, and particularly Conservative Jews, can embrace the full import of Covenant—bearing distinctive responsibilities, beliefs, practices, opportunities, and blessings —without needing to believe that by doing so we are loved more by God or granted what God would regard as unique purchase on the Truth. As Menachem wrote, God’s infinite love does not allow for such favoritism. Nor does the share in that love that has been apportioned to Jews.