

My Encounter with Pope Francis
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Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD
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There is a blessing in our tradition for seeing a king, queen, or head of state. The beracha goes "*Baruch Atah Hashem, Elokeinu Melech Ha'olam she'natan michvodo l'vasar vadam.*"

Blessed are You Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has imparted some of His glory to human beings. For me there was no question about whether to recite this *beracha* upon seeing Pope Francis yesterday in New York City. If you want to be technical, the Pope is a head of state; it may be the smallest state on the planet, but it is a state nonetheless. He commands an army of Swiss guards, an economy, a diplomatic corp. In fact, the Pope is one of the only absolute monarchs left in the world! The Vatican is a country, with a flag, even its own country code internet domain, "VA." The truth is that even if the Pope didn't fit the halachic bill as head of state, the words *she'natan michvodo l'vasar vadam* are an incredibly accurate description of what it feels like to be in the same room with this man. There is a sense of divinely bestowed *kavod*; that you are truly in the presence of a genuinely holy man.

The event I was invited to attend took place at the September 11th Museum and Memorial. Outside the museum, the pope came to offer greetings to families of the victims of the terrorist attacks. I mingled with some of those family members while waiting to enter the museum. Behind me was a widow, a mother of twins who were only a few months old when their father was killed in the north tower of the World Trade Center. This made me think of my eldest daughter Mia, who was only four months old herself when we were living in New York City on September 11, 2001. This proud mother pulled out her i-phone to show me a picture of her daughters from a recent school dance. Both were beautiful--dressed in identical emerald green gowns. She told me how well they are doing in school, how successfully they are growing up. She stood in line with her own mother, who has helped her raise the girls since their father died. In front of me a woman pushing an elderly lady in a wheelchair turned around. She said that her brother, and the only son of the elderly woman, died in the south tower. He too was a father of twins! These girls, however, have been estranged from their father's family since the attack. Their mother only allows sporadic contact, and this woman, their aunt, wept as she told me how much she missed them, how much she yearned to have them as a living connection to her brother, and how she wished they could be closer. All around me were people wearing buttons with pictures of their loved ones, fire fighters and police officers paying homage to fallen comrades, and a growing line up of clergy and religious leaders as well. When I got to the security checkpoint, I was directed to go in one direction while the others I had been speaking with went to the outdoor memorial. They gathered around the massive fountains and pools that are the memorial site for the 9/11 victims. Clergy were directed inside the museum. I entered 3 hours before the pope was scheduled to arrive. I had been to the outside memorial before, but never to the museum. I entered the main lobby and walked into a sea of Catholic hierarchy. Priests in their black dress with white tabbed collars, several bishops with pink sashes and skullcaps, and one Cardinal, Washington's Theodore McCarrick was there too. I walked over

to Cardinal McCarrick to have a moment of Washingtonian bonding. "You know I'm 85," he told me. Actually I didn't know, but he spoke to me like a nephew or a grandson, and told me that he knows Potomac well. He then asked me to pray for him...He is so gentle and kind...I said it would be my honor, and asked him to pray for me too.

We meandered through the museum which is below ground level. Having lived in Manhattan during the September 11th attacks, I was encountering artifacts that brought back a swirl of memories and emotions of having endured that unimaginable time in the City. Eventually we were gathered in Foundation Hall, an area that was once in the middle of the two towers, and it was there that I got a sense of who was there for this historic encounter with Pope Francis. The spectacle was truly beautiful, and I mean that both symbolically and literally. The representatives of the world's great faiths were there in their full array of religious regalia: scarves, stoles, robes, headgear, sashes, face paint, hair braids, turbans, frocks, it was truly a beautiful palate of color and symbolism. I felt so plain in my dark suit and yarmulke--though I did wear a white one in honor of the Pope! I mingled around the room meeting bishops, metropolitans, monks, theologians, and prelates. I took a selfie with Al Sharpton--not a favorite of many Jews, and with Rudy Giuliani--a definite favorite among the Jews. I was seated with Catholic priest on one side and a Jain on the other. I asked the priest, who was from Liverpool, England, how he liked this pope, who is as controversial within the church as he is outside it--albeit for different reasons. He responded, "He's the man! I love him! But I worry about him." I asked him why, and he told me that he is "too beloved". What's wrong with that, I wondered. He told me that a true agent of change can't be so loved. A change agent should agitate and disrupt, not cause people to swoon over him. That was a perspective that I hadn't considered. It did make me recall the famous adage of the Salanter Rebbe who said: "A Rabbi with whom everyone agrees is not a rabbi; and a rabbi with whom no one agrees is not a man." I told the priest what drew me to this event...

I originally wrote to Pope Francis soon after he was elected. I've always been interested in interfaith dialogue, and I remember as a seminarian visiting many of the different seminaries around New York City. I always particularly enjoyed visiting the Catholic seminary because I felt a kinship with them I didn't feel with liberal Protestants. Catholics, like traditional Jews, are steeped in ritual, prayer, and religious discipline that I could relate to and was inspired by. I was swept up by *Nostra Aetate*, and the Catholic Church's radical encounter with its own painful history with the Jewish people, its sincere efforts to acknowledge its past sins against the Jews, and to forge a future of mutual respect. When Francis was elected I was fascinated by how he eschewed the royal trappings of the papacy. He carried his own bags, he took the bus with his fellow cardinals rather than the papal limousine. He lives in a small room in the Vatican hotel rather than in the Apostolic Palace. He even wears the same shoes as my father-in-law, black orthotics--not the handmade red velvet shoes of his predecessors. Even yesterday, Pope Francis looked like he'd rather be wearing something other than the official white papal tunic. I wrote to him that his actions reminded me of what the Torah said of Moses in Numbers 12:3, that he was the humblest of men on earth. I have to confess to you that I don't feel that I have a lot of clergy role models, and when I observed Francis's behavior I felt inspired in my own rabbinate to strive toward greater humility, simplicity, and servanthood.

In our parasha this morning Moses says "*vayishman Yeshurun*," that at certain times in our history the people of Jeshurun have become fat. [Jeshurun is one of the many names of the Jewish people.] That's more of a moral indictment than a physical one. Yeshurun comes from the word *yashar*--meaning straight ahead, or pointed in the right direction. But the very people who are called by that name sometimes possessed too much greed and yearned too much for physical pleasure, opulence, and unnecessary comforts. Again, this made me think of the plight of too many clergy. Pope Francis represents a very different kind of religious leadership. After addressing Congress he decline a lunch invitation with Congressional leaders to instead have lunch with the homeless. This also made me consider my own devotion to needs of the poor--as an individual, as a religious Jew, and as a rabbi.

The letter I wrote to the Pope crossed the desks of Cardinal Weurl and the Apostolic Nuncio who wrote me thanking me for the greetings to the Holy Father. Months later I met Rabbi Abraham Skorka, Pope Francis's dear friend from Argentina with whom he wrote a book on interfaith relations. He spoke at the Argentine Embassy some months ago, and I mentioned to the Apostolic Nuncio, who also happened to be there, that I would love to be a part of the interfaith delegation to welcome the pope to America. I didn't hear anything for months. I was reading, as I'm sure all of you were, about the developing plans for the pope's visit. And then, on the Friday before Rosh Hashanah, I received an invitation from the Archdiocese in New York to attend this event...two days after Yom Kippur and two days before Sukkot. My wife Sari immediately said, "you're going." And thanks to a group wonderful 12th graders from the Berman Hebrew Academy who got my sukkah started for me, I didn't have to worry too much about being away so close to yontiff.

When the Pope finally arrived, everyone stood and an orchestra played a pretty dramatic number for his entrance. While he passed very close to me, I did not get to chat with him, and to all those who dared me to say "gut yontiff pontiff," I am sorry I disappointed you. It was a pretty intimate gathering though, and I watched his mannerisms closely and listened intently to his speech. He began by saying disarmingly, "I'm sorry I'm not speaking to you in English. I can't do it!" Everyone laughed and we put on our listening devices for simultaneous translation. For a world leader who excites crowds into a frenzy, he is remarkably soft-spoken and unassuming. He talked about the egregious misuse of religion that was the horror of 9/11 and pleaded with the people there to lead their flocks to embrace peace and unity. There was not a hint of superiority or an inkling that he possessed a greater truth than anyone else in the room. He did not speak of Jesus directly and didn't convey his message in a way that could be exclusionary to anyone in the room. That was a feat in and of itself, and a great lesson to all those pastors who feel the need to pray in Jesus' name in order to get their point across, even when they know the audience is made up of people of different faiths.

The word "pontiff" derives from the Latin for "bridge builder." As I scanned this room of extraordinarily interesting representatives of so many diverse faith communities, it was clear to me that no one but this pontiff could have built so many bridges among all who were there. I certainly thought of our long, complex history with the papacy; popes who issued papal bills forbidding the publication of the Talmud, censoring Jewish prayerbooks, establishing ghettos, or instigating Crusades and Inquisitions. The Vatican's still unresolved connection to the Holocaust did not escape me either. Yet here was a pope who could not be further from all of that painful past. With great hope for the future of Catholic-Jewish

relations, and feeling inspired by Francis's call for peace and humility, it was with a full heart that I recited the prayer: *Baruch Atah Hashem, Elokeinu Melech Ha'olam she'natan michvodo l'vasar vadam*. Blessed are You Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has imparted some of His glory to human beings...in this case, a very special human being named Jorge Mario Bergoglio, known to the world as Pope Francis.