

***Pope Francis, we need to talk!***

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It would be hard to imagine a friendlier pope to the Jewish people than Pope Francis. Prior to his elevation, Francis—then Jorge Maria Bergoglio—was Archbishop of Buenos Aires—and one of his dearest friends was Rabbi Abraham Skorka, the rector of the Conservative Movement’s rabbinical school, the Seminario Rabbinico Latinoamericano in Argentina. They even co-authored a book, recording their dialogues together about faith. Pope John the XXIII would be a definite contender. He oversaw Vatican II, and publicly repented of the Church’s history of antisemitism. John the XXIII also ordered the removal of the phrase “perfidious Jews” from the Good Friday liturgy. John Paul II was the first pope to visit a synagogue and the first pope to visit Auschwitz...He even received a blessing from three rabbis, one Conservative, one Orthodox, and one Reform. *At the same time!* How many people can say that?! But Francis is definitely right up there with the pro-Jewish popes. You can tell, it’s in his kishkes!

Which is why there was such an uproar, and so much disappointment about his remarks to an audience on August 11<sup>th</sup> at the Vatican, where he addressed “the Mosaic Law.” You can pretty accurately predict that when a Christian theologian mentions “the Mosaic Law,” what comes next is not going to be flattering to Jewish ears. Pope Francis’s homily last month caused even the Chief Rabbis of Israel to demand an explanation, which they officially requested of the Vatican! Here’s what it was about. Francis spoke about a very famous (or infamous) section of the Book of Galatians, a part of the New Testament that highlights an internal struggle that existed in the earliest years of Christianity. There were some early Christians who believed that it was still necessary to observe all the mitzvot in the Torah. While others, like Paul, argued that the mitzvot were no longer required, at least of Gentile converts to the faith. Paul traveled to the community in Galacia, in Asia Minor, where this conflict was ripe, and said in no uncertain terms that the Law was defunct. The only thing that can save you is faith, not the performance of deeds or rituals or, well, mitzvot. Paul calls people who observe the Torah “slaves,” and suggests that the Jewish people are not the true descendants of Abraham. Pope Francis explains that “in making the covenant with Israel, God offered them the Torah, the Law, so that they could understand his will and live in justice. We have to think at that time, a Law

like this was necessary, it was a tremendous gift that God have his people. Why? Because at that time paganism was everywhere, idolatry was everywhere...”

Since the dawn of Christianity however, Francis said: “The Law... does *not* give life, it does *not* offer the fulfillment of the promise because it is *not* capable of being able to fulfill it. The Law is a journey, a journey that leads toward an encounter... Those who seek life need to look to the promise and its fulfillment in... *you know who!* “The encounter with Jesus,” he said, “is more important than all of the commandments.”

We just sang the words a few moments ago, about the Torah, about the Law: “*Eitz chayim hi lemachazikim bah...* it is a tree of life to those who cling to it, *ve'tomcheiha me'ushar*, and all who uphold it find happiness. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.” By the way that’s not just a sweet song that someone wrote for putting away the Torah, those words come from Proverbs, chapter 3. That’s in *the Bible!* Francis said the Torah does not give life. But Proverbs--and you and I just said that it is *a tree of life!*

...So we seem to have a bit of a disagreement. In our Parasha this morning, Moses gathered the entire people of Israel, men, women, children; older people, younger people; the leaders of the tribes, and the woodchoppers and water-schleppers. And just one day before he dies, Moses says to the entire nation of Israel: “See I set before you this day life and prosperity, and death and adversity.”<sup>1</sup> And then, in case you weren’t sure which of those two choices Moses hopes his people will make, he goes on:

This is what I expect of you:

Love the Lord your God, walk in God’s ways, *lishmor mitzvotav v'chukotav u'mishpatav*, keep God’s commandments, laws, and rules, *ve'chayita ve'ravita* and you will live, thrive and increase!<sup>2</sup>

In other words, choosing life means choosing God; choosing life means choosing God’s Torah, choosing God’s commandments. And in Moses’s formulation, rejecting God’s ways amounts to

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<sup>1</sup> Deut. 30:15

<sup>2</sup> Deut. 30:16

*avod toveidun*, certain death...at least a spiritual death, or the death of the Jewish people's unique relationship with God.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, at Passover, my family starts the Seder with this little activity. We go around the table and everyone says one person, living or dead, they wish they could invite to the seder. And then we imagine what it would be like if Harriet Tubman, or Queen Elizabeth, or a great-great grandparent, or Moses himself could be at our table! What would we ask them? What stories would they tell? If I could invite one person to my Seder, or better yet, to shul this Shabbat, it would be Pope Francis. Not only does he remind me of my father-in-law of blessed memory, with his black SAS orthotic shoes, his double chin, and warm smile, but I would love to chat with him about his homily, and about Parashat Nitzavim. I think, with all due respect to the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, the Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, I think he misunderstood the nature of "the Law." Rather than Paul's depiction of the law as an oppressive yoke, a punishment, something to make our lives difficult or unpleasant, we say in the paragraph before the Shema that God gave us the law, the Torah as an expression of *ahavah rabbah*, boundless love! *Vatelandem chukei chayim*, God taught our ancestors life-giving laws!

There's nothing burdensome or onerous there. Only life, and love!

The most important Jewish voice at the Second Vatican Council was that of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the renowned theologian and professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He worked tirelessly to represent Jewish theology to the crafters of *Nostra Aetate*, the official Vatican document that redefined Catholic-Jewish relations. Heschel said in an interview at Notre Dame:

*Christians leave out the possibility and the greatness of Mosaic Law. A Christian theologian would say that the Law is an imposition. We feel the blessing and the love of the Law; we sense God's will...The Torah has not been abolished...We believe that we are living in the ancient Covenant of Sinai.*<sup>4</sup>

If Pope Francis was here today I would invite him to sit down with me, open up a container of Marco's tuna fish, and have a frank discussion about this theological divergence. My sense is

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<sup>3</sup> Deut. 30:18

<sup>4</sup> Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, p. 386

that when the Pope made his comments last month, what he meant to say is not that the Law does not fulfill the promise for Jews, but for Christians. Even Paul didn't tell Jews not to observe the law, just the new Gentiles entering the Church. And that's perfectly fine with me. Jews still very much live in loving commitment to God's Torah, and the Covenant at Sinai. Christians can be good Christians without the law. But without that law, there would be so such thing called Judaism. See that, problem solved. Just a little editing in the papal homily would have clarified this important point. On second thought, maybe I'll offer to be the Pope's editor for Jewish content. He'd just have to have any sermons and statements that have to do with Jews or Judaism vetted by me. I think that would be a pretty good gig, don't you? Shabbat Shalom!