

## The Measure of a Man: Pope John Paul II

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
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As the accolades pour in, and pundits and others around the world eulogize the Pope, it is appropriate to ask: what is the measure of a man?

Literally – what is the measure of a man? A joke from the classic album from the mid 1960's entitled, "When You're In Love, the Whole World is Jewish," goes something like this:

A man comes back from a trip to Europe, and tells his friend about his trip, "Max, you won't believe it. I just came back from Rome. Not only that, guess what? I had a private meeting with the Pope.

So his friend Max asks him, "Nu, Sam – so what do you think of the Pope?"

His friend pauses for a moment and says, "Very nice. If you ask me, I think he's about a 38 short."

I suspect this particular Pope probably knew and enjoyed the joke. I share it today not only because it has to do with the Pope but because it shows that people are judged based on an individual's perspective. For us Jews, our assessment of the life and impact of John Paul II is based on our own particular perspective. Although we could be accused of being provincial, we evaluate individuals and events in the context of their impact upon our people and our community.

Truly, this was an extraordinary man who was extremely gifted. He was charismatic and a marvelous leader, who was the first pope to publicly beg forgiveness for Christian wrongs done to Jews.

Many of the Pope's policies pleased many people, and many of the Pope's policies did not. This religious and spiritual head of a denomination of approximately one billion people never shied away from taking political positions. He encouraged the Solidarity Movement in Poland which helped to bring down the rule of the Iron Curtain. He took a strong stand on issues such as abortion, right to life, birth control and the death penalty. He often opposed wars and military actions. When United States Congressman, Father Robert Drinan, took positions at odds with the Catholic Church, the Pope simply prohibited priests from being elected to office. Yet, this never prevented him from taking political positions, even when they were at odds with others.

I think, therefore, part of the great legacy of this Pope is to remind us, whether we agreed with him or not, of the important role that religion and religious leaders can play in helping to shape the great debates about public policy. As one who did not shy away from controversial issues, the Pope is an appropriate role model for all religious and spiritual leaders. His stands on the important issues of our day reminds us that there is a moral dimension to political decisions and that the impact of public policy should always be considered in light of ethical implications. One can agree or disagree with the Pope's politics, but he should be respected for expressing and articulating a religious and moral perspective on these issues.

For us as Jews, we come back to the question of how he will be remembered by our community. How to measure a man? A life? A Pope?

We often forget and take for granted how intertwined and entangled the unique relationship is between the Jewish religion and the Catholic Church. Judaism is the foundation upon which Christianity and the church is built. Christianity defines itself in the context of the teachings of Judaism. Every Christian bible contains the Jewish bible. Jesus, as well as his early disciples, were all Jews. One of the first major issues confronting the early church Fathers was the question of whether or not it was possible to be a Christian without having first been a Jew.

Throughout the Middle Ages, as well as during the Crusades, Jews were all too frequently the objects of the Church's scorn, persecution and oppression. Jews who clung to their faith did so at the risk of their lives. The Church taught that God had rejected Jews and that we were no longer the chosen people. The destruction of the temple and the words of the prophets were brought as evidence and testament to this rejection. Jews were subjected to forced conversion and were required to enter churches where they heard the sermons ridiculing and denouncing Judaism. Sacred texts such as the Talmud were seized, censored and burned. The synagogues were not allowed to be higher than any church building. Many of the laws adopted by the Nazis in the 1930's and known as the, "Nuremberg Laws" had their origin in the church's Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which among other things, required Jews to wear a distinctive dress and prohibited Jews from employing Christians. The holiday of Passover was an especially difficult time as Jews were accused of seizing and killing Christian children in order to use their blood for the baking of matzah. The black plague, which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands, was blamed on the Jews. We were also accused of the crime of "desecrating the host." It was a pope who first confined the Jews to a ghetto in Rome. The Inquisition, as well as the Expulsion of Jews from Spain, forced conversions, kidnapping of children to raise them as Christians, are all part of the history of actions sanctioned or taken by the Church.

The fury was fueled by the record of the church, of priests, and of popes throughout the millennia in that they more often than not promoted this agenda and contributed to and even created the spirit of the time.

The reasons for the Church's anti-semitism are not important or relevant. Whether it was due to the charge of deicide, leveled in the New Testament itself or if it was predicated upon economic considerations or other factors is not what matters. As I have often said, when one is aware of the thousand year history of the Jews of Europe and the Church, the Holocaust is a bit less of a surprise and not so totally unexpected. It is an outgrowth and extension of centuries of hatred, brutality and religious doctrine.

To truly appreciate the magnitude of the changes and the record of Pope John Paul II, it must be considered against this historic backdrop. When he ascended to the papacy, for Jews the question was whether or not John Paul II would be more like his predecessor, John XXIII, or his immediate predecessor, Paul VI.

Pope John XXIII was unquestionably a true mensch, in every sense of the word. He was the one who first set the Church on the course of reconciliation with the Jewish community. In a very famous and dramatic meeting with a group of Jewish leaders in the early 1960's, he greeted them with the powerful biblical words, "I am Joseph, your brother." He went on to change the direction of the Catholic Church away from one of hostile confrontation to reconciliation with the Jewish community. He was the one

who began to teach that Jews were not responsible for the death of Jesus and, who developed the document *Nostra Aetate*, known as Vatican II, that the Church should reevaluate and reject historic and inherent its animosity towards the Jewish people.

On the other hand, Pope Paul VI will be remembered by the Jewish people for the fact that he managed to visit the Holy Land without ever setting foot on Israeli territory. He remained silent when terrorist attacks were launched against innocent Jews and Israelis. I recall the 18 children who were murdered in cold blood in Ma'alot in 1970 by Arab terrorists who came across the border from Lebanon. Israel subsequently went into Lebanon and blew up a \$21 million plane as a means of conveying an important message to the government of Lebanon not to let further terrorist infiltrations to come across the border and that there would be repercussions. The elite Israeli force worked carefully and diligently to protect human life and to ensure that no human lives were lost and that no people were killed, even though this meant placing their lives at greater risk.

True to form, the very next day the United Nations condemned the attack. Pope Paul VI joined in the chorus of condemnations of Israel, while never condemning the terrorists. He offered no words to comfort the families of the 18 Jewish school children who had been killed in northern Israel.

So in taking on the name John Paul, the question was which Pope would be the one that this one would emulate: Would he be more like John or more like Paul?

From our perspective he was truly great, though his record was not perfect. Many Jews were upset with the Pope for meeting with Austrian President and former United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim after his role as a Nazi had been widely revealed. The Pope was one of the few world leaders to meet with him at a time when we call upon the nations of the world to ostracize him. We also were not pleased with the Pope's embrace of Arafat, a terrorist murderer with blood on his hands. Against our advice, he beatified Edith Stein, a Jew who converted to Christianity, and strongly advocated for Pius XII being nominated as a Saint even though the Jewish community has unanimously condemned Pius XII for his actions and complicity during the Holocaust.

Yet, despite these acts, which disappointed the Jewish community, it is fair to say that this Pope will be beloved and revered by the Jewish people, and will go down in history as a true friend.

Rabbi Marvin Heier, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Center mourned him, saying, "in the two thousand year history of the papacy, no previous occupant of the throne of St. Peter has had such an interest in seeking reconciliation with the Jewish people...With his passing, the world has lost a great moral leader and a righteous man and the Jewish people have lost its staunchest advocate in the history of the Church."

Pope John Paul II grew up in Poland and lived there during World War II. He had many Jewish friends, one of whom remained a lifelong friend of his even after he became Pope. When a Christian family entrusted with a Jewish child in 1942 asked their local priest in Krakow if they could keep and raise the child as a Catholic after the parents perished in Auschwitz, the man who would be Pope, contrary to Church policy of the time, asked what the wishes of the parents were. When he learned that they had wanted the child to live as a Jew, he insisted that the child not be baptized, and that instead he be returned to his Jewish family. Today this observant Jew, living in Manhattan joins the rest of the world in mourning the loss of an extraordinary individual.

He was the very first Pope to ever visit a synagogue. Pope John Paul II will be remembered for his powerful visits to Auschwitz, and Yad Vashem, and the powerful conciliatory statements of regret and apology he made there on behalf of the Church, as well as his memorable visit to Israel in March of 2001, including leaving a kvittel in the Western Wall. Recognition of Israel was no small matter, either, as it meant a radical departure from Christian theology of the past 2,000 years that Jews were forever doomed to exile, never again to be sovereign in their homeland.

In dramatic fashion, he taught the Christian world that Christians must take responsibility for the Holocaust and for the anti-Semitic acts perpetrated by the Church throughout the centuries and the harm it has done to Jews. He referred to anti-semitism as a sin against God and humanity. In the spirit of the words of his predecessor, John XXIII, he referred to Jews and told Catholics we should be regarded as, "elder brothers in faith."

And so John Paul II will be remembered for many things. Most of all, he will be remembered for his powerful teachings and courageous acts, for his kindness, his decency and his humanity. Having participated in Catholic – Jewish dialogues which have taken place as a direct result of his influence, I can personally attest to the power of his message and reach of his influence. His legacy will be to remind us and the rest of the world that the Jewish concept of teshuvah, meaning repentance, healing, and reconciliation, is possible.

We join the world in mourning him and invoke the words of our tradition, "May the memory of this tzaddik, this righteous man, be for a blessing."

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
Congregation B'nai Tzedek  
Potomac, MD  
April 9, 2005  
[potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org](mailto:potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org)