

Parshat Toldot – A Tribute to Father John Walsh OBM.

As most of you are aware, a leading light of the Montreal faith community, was laid to rest earlier this week.

Father John as he was affectionately known as, was active in promoting better relations between Jews and Christians since 1973, when he spent eight months in Israel with a group of students. When talking about other faiths, Father John said, “We have different religions and cultures, but we all recognize one God. How can it be that He has different compartments for all the different religions? We share a reasonably common vision of God, it’s up to us to get along better and recognize that maybe we have more in common than we thought”.

In 2015 the Vatican issued a remarkable document about the Jewish faith called “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable.” In that document the Pope affirmed that God keeps His covenants and the Jewish people are in a special relationship with God. When it came out, Father John wrote an article titled, “Listen for the Whisper” that was published on the Convivium website. In his article, Father John reflected on three goals for Jewish-Christian dialogue:

1. To help us “reach a profound knowledge of each other, whereby the partners become the recipients of gifts.”
2. To foster “joint engagement throughout the world for justice, peace, conservation of creation and reconciliation.”
3. And the third goal to combat “all manifestations of racial discrimination against Jews and all forms of anti-Semitism.”

Father John put into practice those words he preached (maybe mention an example?).

The change in Catholic attitudes toward Jews expressed by Father John and codified by *Nostra Aetate*, the revolutionary document from the church over 50 years ago that transformed Roman Catholic policy and attitudes toward the Jews, is a remarkable change from centuries of official church anti-Semitism. Many Jews were skeptical of Catholic

efforts to reach out to Jews. “The leopard doesn’t change its spots,” they said, quoting a Talmudic dictum and thinking of horrors such as the Inquisition when Jews were hunted down and tortured and killed by the church, or Pope Pius XII, who many Jews feel didn’t speak up or do enough to try and stop the

Holocaust or help Jews. Relations between siblings are often fraught, and Judaism and Christianity are siblings. Some people think Judaism is the “parent,” but that’s not really accurate:

Judaism was reinvented in the 1st century after the destruction of the Temple. Judaism and Christianity date from the same time, both based on the older Temple entered sacrificial religion.

This week’s Torah portion is a prime example of how fraught relations between siblings can be. Right at the start of this week’s reading Jacob and Esau are struggling in the womb. The rabbis were very quick to let us know which brother was the good brother and which brother the bad brother. They say the struggle was because Jacob wanted to get out to go to the Beit Midrash, and Esau wanted to get out to go to a place of idol worship.

Jacob, the “man’s man,” a hunter and trapper, is Daddy’s favorite. Isaac, who likes to hang around the tent, is a “Momma’s boy.” No doubt the parental favoritism helped fuel a sense of rivalry. Jacob comes across as not very nice: refusing to feed his hungry brother until he sells him his birthright for a bowl or lentil soup.

Conspiring with his mother to steal Isaac’s deathbed blessing to Esau. It’s no surprise that Esau is furious with Jacob, and Jacob feels he needs to flee for his life.

Jacob of course later receives the name “Yisrael” after struggling through the night with an angel – he’s the representative of Israel, of the Jewish people. And Esau, also called Edom, came to be associated with Rome in the rabbinic imagination – making Esau the father of, and representative of Christians.

In the history of the relations between Jews and Christians, it's clear the Jews are the ones who first rejected the Christians, not the other way around. The early Christians – in the 1st century and early 2nd century – were mostly observant Jews who just happened to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Very similar to today's world where many Jews associated with Chabad believe that Rabbi Menachem

Mendel Schneerson is the Messiah, and he's going to come back from the dead. You can believe in the wrong Messiah and still be Jewish. Back in the 2nd century our great rabbi, Rabbi Akiva, believed that Bar Kochba was the Messiah – and he kept that belief until Bar Kochba was killed by the Romans.

As the early Christians drifted further away from Jewish teachings and incorporated more elements of Greek thought into their religion they increasingly came to be viewed as heretics by the rabbis. So much so that the rabbis added a 19th blessing to the Shemoneh Esrei (which means 18) – the one about heretics, “Let there be no hope for informers, and may all the heretics and all the wicked instantly perish,” a blessing which we continue to recite in the weekday Amidah today.

Over time, as converts from paganism became the majority of Christians, and Christianity increasingly severed itself from Judaism, Jews and Christians came to see each other as different: as “the other.”

For a few hundred years, it didn't really matter much. Jews and Christians were both persecuted minorities in the Roman Empire. But when Constantine converted to Christianity in the 4th century, and Christianity became the official state religion, everything changed. The Christians were in power, and the Jews were a minority, and the oppressed became oppressors.

Also in the 4th century St. Augustine said Jews should be kept around as witnesses to the prophecies. He called Jews, “the house of Israel that God has cast off...those on whose closed eyes He shed His light.” And this led to official church doctrine for 1,600 years, that Jews were a people abandoned by God, and Christians had inherited a “new covenant,” taking the place of the old covenant God had with the

Jewish people. When the Popes came to temporal power, they used it to issue anti-Semitic decrees. Jews were banned from serving in public office, they were forced to live in ghettos, and they were forced to wear distinctive clothing. And it seems for many Jews there simply was no escape. The Spanish Inquisition was focused on Jews who converted to Christianity to avoid persecution. Jews were called Christ-killers, and Easter Week was a time Jews hid, terrified. In the 19th century a 6-year-old Jewish boy, Edgardo Mortara, in Italy was seized by the Catholics, kidnapped from his family by the police and raised as a Catholic, because a former servant testified, she had given the boy an emergency baptism as an infant. In the Papal States at that time, it was illegal for a non-Christian family to raise a Christian child. There were international protests, but Pope Pius IX didn't care. By the time the Papal State collapsed, the boy was already grown, and was training to become a priest, with the Pope as his substitute father.

In the 20th century, Pope Pius XI gave some nice speeches. In 1938 he said "Anti-Semitism is inadmissible. We are all spiritually Semites." But he didn't do much about it, and most Jews feel that his successor, Pope Pius XII did little to speak out against the Holocaust.

For nearly 2,000 years there was enmity between Jews and the Catholic Church. When Christians look at the cross, they see a symbol of God's love. When Jews look at a cross, we get the heeby jeebies and see it as a symbol of oppression and persecution. The Catholics considered Jews abandoned by God, and Jews considered Christians idol worshippers.

The long and painful history makes the Papal declaration of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 truly remarkable. No longer were Jews considered cast aside by God. *Nostra Aetate* declares, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues-such is the witness of the Apostle. In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and "serve him shoulder to shoulder."

Jews are no longer officially considered “Christ killers.” Nostra Aetate also says, True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.

Nostra Aetate also officially condemns anti-Semitism: the Church...“decries hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

When Pope John Paul II visited Israel in March 2000, he followed the Jewish custom of leaving a slip of paper in the cracks of the Western Wall. On his slip of paper he wrote, the God of our Fathers, You chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations: we are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer and, asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant.

Some Jews have been slow to acknowledge the changed attitude among Catholics.

The traditional rabbinic attitude toward Edom, Esau, was definitely to view him with suspicion. In Parshat Vayishlach, when Jacob and Esau are reunited after 20 years, the Torah tells us, Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.

There’s a Midrash that says the only reason Esau wept is because when he fell on Jacob’s neck, he tried to bite it, but his neck had turned to marble, and Esau hurt his teeth.

But there are other rabbinic interpretations as well. Rashi brings the following teaching from Sifrei: “R Simeon the son of Johai said: Is it not well-known that Esau hated Jacob? But at that moment his pity was really aroused, and he kissed him with his whole heart.”

Maybe the right way to read that verse in the Torah is to accept it at face value.

After a long period of separation and enmity, the brothers were happy to join together again, to put their differences aside.

Let us reach out to, and encourage, those Christians such as Father John who have reached out to the Jewish community in love and friends.