

# Talking to the Other

**Jewish Interfaith  
Dialogue with  
Christians and Muslims**

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# 1

## Interfaith Dialogue – A Personal Introduction

This book is over 30 years in the making. But they are years made up of fragments. Moments of encounter, breakthroughs in understanding, papers and lectures delivered and received, extraordinary friendships and embarrassing mistakes – above all, late-night conversations at conference centres, in hotel lobbies, railway station waiting rooms and cafes – wherever the journey led me. And behind such opportunities for meeting and learning, endless hours of hectic work – preparing conferences, resolving misunderstandings, frenzied translations of late-arriving lectures, sweating over recalcitrant photocopy machines, stuffing envelopes and hunting for that extra sum of money to ensure that a particular programme could actually take place. Much of the work of interfaith dialogue goes on behind the scenes and owes a lot to an invisible army of ‘enablers’. To the above must be added occasional moments of reflection on the mysteries of human interaction and the question of what the Jewish religion has to offer to a world of many religions, or of none, in the opening years of the twenty-first century.

The immediate trigger for finally writing this book is the event that shattered our understanding throughout the world about how life needs to be conducted between peoples of different religious faiths in this new millennium. The attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001 brought home the horror of terrorism as never before. But it also revealed the depth of our ignorance of one another, and hence the mistrust and often hostility between different faith communities.

President Bush's initial talk of a crusade unleashed memories of the horrors perpetrated in the name of Christianity in the Middle Ages. The language of 'Jihad', used almost cynically by the supporters of terror to summon Muslims to a holy war against the demon America, and used uncritically by our own media, fed Western fears and fantasies about the nature of Islam. There is a massive task of education and rethinking that needs to be done alongside the actions taken at least to curtail the power of those who practise terror. Part of that task is also to attempt to eliminate the injustices, poverty and despair that breed the desperation that leads to terror.

Against this background, this book sets out to address two questions. Firstly, what can Judaism contribute out of its tradition and teachings to interfaith dialogue – issues such as pluralism, multicultural society, conflict resolution and universal values? And secondly, what is the actual experience, and what issues arise for Jews and their partners, particularly Christians and Muslims, when Jews engage in dialogue?

Of course, the theory and practice are not totally separated. It is precisely in the course of the dialogue itself that one discovers the questions that need to be addressed to Judaism, and the answers too are influenced by what the partner brings to the encounter. Nevertheless, the book is conceived in two parts. The first deals with the particular values that Judaism brings to a range of dialogue-related issues, the second with my own experience, particularly in addressing Christians and Muslims.

To the latter part there is a second element – namely, how does one address 'the folks back home', one's co-religionists who may view the whole enterprise with suspicion or at best scepticism. Yet this element is crucial if dialogue is to change attitudes and develop new adherents.

In order to understand Jewish values and teachings it is helpful to have some background knowledge of Judaism: where we come from, what forces have shaped us. So much of Jewish history is actually the result of interaction with surrounding nations and religions, though 'dialogue' has rarely been the appropriate term to understand such interactions. Aspects of this history will be given where appropriate. At this point it is helpful to point to one particular factor. Judaism is composed of two elements. Judaism is the religious expression of a particular people, and the interaction between faith and peoplehood is a constantly changing factor, particularly

in the past few centuries. This twofold combination makes it radically different from either Christianity or Islam, at least in theory, and leads to some confusion for those who think of religions purely in terms of a community of believers.

To round off the book, a number of appendices document important multifaith events that sadly relate to the Israel–Palestine conflict. Since the platform for a rabbi tends to be the pulpit, I have included two sermons that reflect on the event of 11 September and the Israel–Palestine conflict, the latter delivered to a mixed Jewish-Christian-Muslim audience. At the end is a contemporary Jewish prayer on the value and need for interfaith dialogue.

Since dialogue is about encountering the ‘other’ in their own terms, it feels appropriate to introduce myself and some stages in my own journey. I have always been struck by a line from Molière’s *Bourgeois Gentillhomme*, at least insofar as I remember it from schoolboy French. In his quest to become a ‘gentleman’, Molière’s comic hero takes lessons in the arts of civilised behaviour, including dancing and fencing. One of his teachers introduces him to the concepts of poetry and prose. This leads to the moment of revelation when he discovers ‘I’ve been speaking prose all my life and I never knew it!’

While putting together this book, I began to realise that in a variety of ways I have been ‘speaking dialogue’ for most of my life and have only gradually come to know it. So inevitably some of what is to be found in this book is personal. Dialogue is something that I ‘do’ – and have done throughout my career as a rabbi. But it is also about who I am, or at least seek to be. So I think it is helpful to sketch out something of my own journey that has led a middle-class, British Jewish boy out of a comfortable ghetto into encounters and friendships, as well as challenges and responsibilities, I could never have imagined.

The very nature of the Jewish experience of the last century places us at the heart of issues that affect the whole of society, and we have to respond as best we can. It is particularly the responsibility of Jews who are committed to the Reform or Liberal end of the spectrum of Jewish religious practice to be at the forefront of the dialogue with modernity in all its various guises, and obviously at the interface with the outer world and

other faith traditions. The times determine what is essential, and the situation of Jews in an open society is not merely affected by outside forces but to a large extent defined by them. So areas like interfaith dialogue, that might have seemed marginal at various times in the past, are now much more central.

My own experience of interfaith work began before I qualified as a rabbi. Of course on one level, any Jew growing up in England, attending school and university, faces on a daily basis an outside world that is overtly Christian. Decisions about whether to attend Christian services at school, how to cope with Christmas, what to do about the occasional manifestation of antisemitism – these are all part of the unconscious forces that impinge upon one's Jewish identity.

But I owe my first conscious approach to Jewish-Christian dialogue to Rabbi Lionel Blue. One of the first graduates of Leo Baeck College, Lionel had once contemplated conversion to Christianity while still a student at Oxford University, and had explored many aspects of the religion.<sup>1</sup> When he entered the rabbinate it was with a great awareness of the values, particularly in the area of personal spirituality, that he had acquired from his explorations of Christianity. When he and I collaborated in organising the youth section of the World Union for Progressive Judaism during the early sixties, I learnt from him to respect religious teachers and teachings, from whatever source they came. We were very conscious at the time that our own Jewish world was lacking in spiritual leaders as a direct consequence of the war. A generation of rabbis and teachers was missing, and in our own rabbinic training we were aware that we lacked models and indeed 'father figures' against whom to measure our own spiritual growth.

The Judaism that I had experienced in my childhood in an orthodox synagogue in south London was very uninspiring, geared to a series of practical dos and don'ts without much intellectual or spiritual underpinning. The Reform world that I entered through the youth movement was itself not much more than a social club with good ethical intentions but limited Jewish content. The few rabbis available were good congregational workers but lacked the charisma and overt spiritual grandeur that I was looking for in my somewhat romantic way. What Lionel managed to do was find amongst his acquaintances people with a far clearer grasp of their own

spiritual centre. Amongst them was Leslie Shepard, an English folklorist, Reichian analyst and Vedantist who taught me my first guitar chords, but, as we only half-jokingly put it, helped us keep our metaphysics straight. Certainly it was in dialogue with such people that we began to clarify what was uniquely Jewish and what was missing in the Judaism that we saw around us. I suspect that we were experiencing in our own small world something of the spirit of the sixties. That decade was a powerful time for me personally, enhanced by living through the Six-Day War in Jerusalem, where I found a circle of Jewish writers, artists and teachers who gave me back some confidence in Jewish spirituality as well.

Looking back, especially from my position as principal of Leo Baeck College, I can see that we were in the process of defining a kind of Judaism and spiritual searching that was appropriate for a postwar, emerging pluralistic society in Britain and elsewhere. Old barriers between religious communities were breaking down, and indeed the people who were committed to a religion often felt themselves to be in a minority in a growing secular environment. It was this need to create alliances in such a situation that led to one particular initiative from Lionel that I helped develop. Our work was triggered by the success in elections of the neo-Nazi party in Germany and concerns about a fascist revival. Lionel posed the question: in Germany the only ideology offered after the war was that of the *Wirtschaftswunder*: ever-growing material success. To put it crudely, the answer to every spiritual problem was to buy a new refrigerator! The only groups that seemed to be offering any ideological input into this vacuum were the right-wing movements – this predated the emergence of the new left.

So who was offering a more universal, international, spiritual ideology to counter them? Lionel thought of creating a kind of alliance of the ‘good guys’ – religious youth movements, organisations that arranged work camps in underprivileged areas, those that sought to do reconciliation work. Out of this emerged an organisation with the rather threatening title ‘European Action’. It had a short-lived career promoting a few conferences and work camps. We planned one such programme in Wolfsburg, the home of Volkswagen, where there had been a large support for the neo-Nazi party and elections were soon to be held. With the help of a local pastor we



arranged for a conference, some public lectures and a work camp activity in the area. (Voluntary work camps were by then beginning to disappear, partly because it was difficult to find appropriate work. We ended up painting a locomotive in a children's playground as our contribution to world peace!)

The organisation did not survive very long. One of the main reasons was what turned out to be a key lesson for us. It was one thing to invite on board organisations that saw themselves as working towards the same religious goals, but it was quite another to deal with the political manoeuvring and questions of official representation and voting rights that took place from the very beginning. I suspect we were just naive about the whole business and could have 'pulled it off' with more experience – but we learnt that whereas we could work with individuals whom we came to know and trust, working with existing institutions was extremely difficult, time-consuming and disillusioning.

Then something new crystallised what we were trying to do. In the period leading up to the Six-Day War, Lionel pointed out that beyond the limited political entities of Israel and the Arab states were the three great monotheistic faiths, with many shared beliefs. Could they not create channels for mutual understanding that would help resolve the political conflict? Together with Pastor Winfried Maechler of the Evangelische Akademie in Berlin and other Christian and Muslim colleagues, they arranged the first meetings in Berlin to try to build such new relationships. This time the organisation we set up was called the Standing Conference of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Europe, which meant that it only existed when a conference was held. Though the Berlin Akademie, the Leo Baeck College in London, the German Muslim League in Bonn and the Hedwig Dransfeld Haus in Bendorf are partners in creating the conferences, it remains without organisation and officers but has continued to be effective for over 30 years.

I have rather moved ahead of my own personal story and would like to return to that for a moment. The conferences for Jewish young people that Lionel and I organised in Holland in the early sixties brought us into contact with young Jews from Germany. They challenged us by pointing out that many Jewish organisations invited them to attend conferences

abroad, but no-one came to Germany. We took up the challenge by arranging the first international Jewish youth conference in Berlin since the war. I myself hitched a ride to Berlin with these young people, as I did not want to impose something on others I was not prepared to experience for myself. It was on returning from my visit there that I knew that I had decided to become a rabbi, so the experience of encountering Germany has had a profound effect on my subsequent religious journey.

I have to admit that I found Germany attractive for a variety of reasons, not all of them particularly religious. At school I had had a year of German and my teacher had introduced me to the plays of Brecht. Lionel introduced me to Lotte Lenya singing the marvellous melodies of Kurt Weill, and I found myself particularly drawn to that pre-war world of German culture, with its strong Jewish component. Also, I met on my travels a number of young, left-wing German pastors who became friends and who opened up for me a very different Germany from the one of Jewish fears and fantasy. Or rather, in their struggle as a postwar generation to build a new Germany, I found a moving counterpoint to our own attempts to rebuild Jewish life in Europe after the catastrophe of the Shoah (Holocaust). What became tragically clear to me was that there existed in Germany young people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who were unable to understand or come to terms with their past. They could not communicate with their parents – the Germans because of what they might have done in the war, and the Jews because their parents could not justify why they had remained or settled in Germany. And yet these same young people whom, it seemed to me, somehow held the key to each other's dilemma, never met. Perhaps in the feelings of frustration at this lack of communication my own interest in dialogue was unconsciously born.

The decisive factor in changing my approach to the whole issue was the meeting with Anneliese Debray, the director of what was then a Catholic conference centre, the Hedwig Dransfeld Haus, Bendorf/Rhein. Anneliese was a remarkable woman who set about transforming the Haus into a centre for reconciliation work after the war. She instituted German-Polish and German-French conferences, transformed the Haus into an ecumenical centre and then an interfaith one, initially by seeking out Jews with whom to dialogue and subsequently Muslims. I first visited the Haus one Whitsun

with some fellow rabbinic students, and the impact of our presence was so powerful that we were invited to the summer Christian bible study week that same year. The result was to transform it into what has become the annual Jewish-Christian Bible Week, now in existence for well over 30 years.

A number of elements were important for me in these early encounters, firstly the seriousness with which the German participants approached religion, and their hunger to learn about Judaism. I am, and was at the time, aware of the many dimensions to this curiosity, including amongst some a kind of neurotic philosemitism, a desire to 'love' Jews out of a feeling of guilt about the past. And yet beyond that, there was a genuine interest, because of both the recent past and their curiosity about the origins of Christianity itself and the Jewish background of Jesus. My faltering German did not allow me to understand all that was going on in those early years, but I did come to value many of the participants and the genuineness of their searching. Indeed, the kind of questions they posed to me about Jews and Judaism went far deeper than anything I had experienced in my own community. Religion here was a live issue, and the questions that were asked and the answers that were given had consequences for the lives of those who asked them.

I have no doubt that there are factors on my part that are also less than purely holy. It was enormously flattering to be suddenly so important in the lives of these people. With my relatively limited knowledge of Judaism I was being asked very profound questions which sent me scurrying back to my books, but which also required me to mine my own spiritual intuition. Nor was this simply a one-way traffic. Many people became part of a circle of spiritual teachers and colleagues, each very different, but each part of a nourishing fellowship. In a way, the two annual Bendorf Conferences, the Jewish-Christian-Muslim (JCM) Student Conference in the spring and the Jewish-Christian Bible Week in the summer, remain for me touchstones on my religious journey, and they have generated enormous spiritual gifts for others. Moreover, they have become models for what is possible, particularly in the complex dialogue between Jews and Muslims, that are important far beyond their immediate impact. (I will explore something of the lessons obtained from the JCM conferences in the chapter on 'Risk-taking in Religious Dialogue'.)

This kind of religious encounter, which falls under the label ‘dialogue’, is about the meeting of minds and spirits in an attempt to understand and develop a shared commitment to the spiritual life of this society. In most cases it is the personal relationship that comes first; the accident of a particular religious background is secondary, or rather is merely the excuse that has brought us together. Again I have to stress this, because I believe that it is the mutual trust and love that this kind of meeting generates that allows each of us to operate effectively and constructively within our own home communities, and the institutional frameworks for interfaith dialogue that we support. People whose lives are dedicated to giving to others, whether it is in the ministry or other caring professions, need such opportunities to recharge their spiritual batteries and be reassured that their situation, in which they often feel isolated, is not unique, and that others share their commitments. These conferences are a kind of ‘safe space’ in which much may happen if people are prepared to allow it. The dialogue with the other is as much a dialogue with oneself.

Unfortunately, dialogue is often regarded as a kind of luxury for a few people on the edge of their own religious communities. A nice hobby but of no significance in terms of the real things we should be doing within our own religious home.

Nevertheless, sometimes it is precisely that which seems peripheral that may prove of value for our inner concerns. Moreover, there are urgent issues within our society as a whole that may overshadow our self-absorption and make our relationship with others especially important.

I am not naive about the difficulties of creating and supporting a multicultural society – they will form the basis of chapter 3. Reason and common sense alone do not touch the emotional issues that underlie intercommunity prejudices and fears. Something more is needed if we are to treat the underlying problems and emotions and resist those who exploit differences for their own personal or political ends. Dialogue is the only approach I know that builds trust, mutual respect, friendship and love. The first step is the same as it is in every other kind of relationship – we have to learn how to listen to each other, to those who are ‘other’, to take a chance on meeting and to create the frameworks for sustaining these contacts and deepening them.

There is a verse in the Psalms which says '*bikkesh shalom v'rod'fehu*', 'Seek peace and pursue it' (Psalm 34:15). The rabbis pointed out that for most other commandments, we are only instructed to do them when they come our way – but when it comes to peace, we are to be actively engaged in seeking it out, working for it and maintaining it. Interfaith dialogue is one of the tools available to us for seeking peace and pursuing it. It is not peripheral to our religious task today, but absolutely central.