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Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity

December 3, 2015

To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven:

Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians

After nearly two millennia of mutual hostility and alienation, we Orthodox Rabbis who lead communities, institutions and seminaries in Israel, the United States and Europe recognize the historic opportunity now before us. We seek to do the will of our Father in Heaven by accepting the hand offered to us by our Christian brothers and sisters. Jews and Christians must work together as partners to address the moral challenges of our era.

1. The Shoah ended 70 years ago. It was the warped climax to centuries of disrespect, oppression and rejection of Jews and the consequent enmity that developed between Jews and Christians. In retrospect it is clear that the failure to break through this contempt and engage in constructive dialogue for the good of humankind weakened resistance to evil forces of anti-Semitism that engulfed the world in murder and genocide.
2. We recognize that since the Second Vatican Council the official teachings of the Catholic Church about Judaism have changed fundamentally and irrevocably. The promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* fifty years ago started the process of reconciliation between our two communities. *Nostra Aetate* and the later official Church documents it inspired unequivocally reject any form of anti-Semitism, affirm the eternal Covenant between G-d and the Jewish people, reject deicide and stress the unique relationship between Christians and Jews, who were called “our elder brothers” by Pope John Paul II and “our fathers in faith” by Pope Benedict XVI. On this basis, Catholics and other Christian officials started an honest dialogue with Jews that has grown during the last five decades. We appreciate the Church’s affirmation of Israel’s unique place in sacred history and the ultimate world redemption. Today Jews have experienced sincere love and respect from many Christians that have been expressed in many dialogue initiatives, meetings and conferences around the world.
3. As did Maimonides and Yehudah Halevi,[1] we acknowledge that the emergence of Christianity in human history is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations. In separating Judaism and Christianity, G-d willed a separation between partners with significant theological differences, not a separation between enemies. Rabbi Jacob Emden wrote that “Jesus brought a double goodness to the world. On the one hand he strengthened the Torah of Moses majestically... and not one of our Sages spoke out more emphatically concerning the immutability of the Torah. On the other hand he removed idols from the nations and obligated them in the seven commandments of Noah so that they would not behave like animals of the field, and instilled them firmly with moral traits.....Christians are congregations that work for the sake of heaven who are destined to endure, whose intent is for the sake of heaven and whose reward will not be denied.”[2] Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch taught us that Christians “have accepted the Jewish Bible of the Old Testament as a book of Divine revelation. They profess their belief in the G-d of Heaven and Earth as proclaimed in the Bible and they

acknowledge the sovereignty of Divine Providence.”[3] Now that the Catholic Church has acknowledged the eternal Covenant between G-d and Israel, we Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption, without any fear that this will be exploited for missionary purposes. As stated by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel’s Bilateral Commission with the Holy See under the leadership of Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, “We are no longer enemies, but unequivocal partners in articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of humanity”.[4] Neither of us can achieve G-d’s mission in this world alone.

4. Both Jews and Christians have a common covenantal mission to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty, so that all humanity will call on His name and abominations will be removed from the earth. We understand the hesitation of both sides to affirm this truth and we call on our communities to overcome these fears in order to establish a relationship of trust and respect. Rabbi Hirsch also taught that the Talmud puts Christians “with regard to the duties between man and man on exactly the same level as Jews. They have a claim to the benefit of all the duties not only of justice but also of active human brotherly love.” In the past relations between Christians and Jews were often seen through the adversarial relationship of Esau and Jacob, yet Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berliner (Netziv) already understood at the end of the 19th century that Jews and Christians are destined by G-d to be loving partners: “In the future when the children of Esau are moved by pure spirit to recognize the people of Israel and their virtues, then we will also be moved to recognize that Esau is our brother.”[5]
5. We Jews and Christians have more in common than what divides us: the ethical monotheism of Abraham; the relationship with the One Creator of Heaven and Earth, Who loves and cares for all of us; Jewish Sacred Scriptures; a belief in a binding tradition; and the values of life, family, compassionate righteousness, justice, inalienable freedom, universal love and ultimate world peace. Rabbi Moses Rivkis (Be’er Hagoleh) confirms this and wrote that “the Sages made reference only to the idolator of their day who did not believe in the creation of the world, the Exodus, G-d’s miraculous deeds and the divinely given law. In contrast, the people among whom we are scattered believe in all these essentials of religion.”[6]
6. Our partnership in no way minimizes the ongoing differences between the two communities and two religions. We believe that G-d employs many messengers to reveal His truth, while we affirm the fundamental ethical obligations that all people have before G-d that Judaism has always taught through the universal Noahide covenant.
7. In imitating G-d, Jews and Christians must offer models of service, unconditional love and holiness. We are all created in G-d’s Holy Image, and Jews and Christians will remain dedicated to the Covenant by playing an active role together in redeeming the world.

Initial signatories (in alphabetical order):

Rabbi Jehoshua Ahrens (Germany)

Rabbi Marc Angel (United States)

Rabbi Isak Asiel (Chief Rabbi of Serbia)

Rabbi David Bigman (Israel)

Rabbi David Bollag (Switzerland)

Rabbi David Brodman (Israel)
Rabbi Natan Lopez Cardozo (Israel)
Rav Yehudah Gilad (Israel)
Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein (Israel)
Rabbi Irving Greenberg (United States)
Rabbi Marc Raphael Guedj (Switzerland)
Rabbi Eugene Korn (Israel)
Rabbi Daniel Landes (Israel)
Rabbi Steven Langnas (Germany)
Rabbi Benjamin Lau (Israel)
Rabbi Simon Livson (Chief Rabbi of Finland)
Rabbi Asher Lopatin (United States)
Rabbi Shlomo Riskin (Israel)
Rabbi David Rosen (Israel)
Rabbi Naftali Rothenberg (Israel)
Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger (Israel)
Rabbi Shmuel Sirat (France)
Rabbi Daniel Sperber (Israel)
Rabbi Jeremiah Wohlberg (United States)
Rabbi Alan Yuter (Israel)

Subsequent signatories:

Rabbi David Bauman (USA)
Rabbi Abraham Benhamu (Peru)
Rabbi Todd Berman (Israel)
Rabbi Michael Beyo (USA)
Rabbi Michael Chernick (USA)
Rabbi Josef Douzich (Canada)
Rabbi David Ellis (Canada)
Rabbi Seth Farber (Israel)
Rabbi Ben Greenberg (USA)
Rabbi Yeshayahu Hollander (Israel)
Rabbi David be Meir Hasson (Chile)
Rabbi Herzl Hefter (Israel)
Rabbi Zvi Herberger (Norway/Estonia)
Rabbi David Jaffe (USA)
Rabbi David Kalb (USA)
Rabbi Joseph Kolakowski (USA)
Rabbi Frederick Klein (USA)
Rabbi Shaya Kilimnick (USA)
Rabbi Yehoshua Looks (Israel)
Rabbi Ariel Mayse (USA)
Rabbi Bryan Opert (S. Africa)
Rabbi David Rose (UK)

Rabbi Daniel Sherbill (USA)
Rabbi Zvi Solomons (UK)
Rabbi Yair Silverman (Israel)
Rabbi Daniel Raphael Silverstein (USA)
Rabbi Mashada Vaivsaunu (Armenia)
Rabbi Shmuel Yanklowitz (USA)
Rabbi Lawrence Zierler (USA)
Rabbi Avram Rosenfeld (USA)
Rabbi Aaron Leibowitz (Israel)
Rose Britton (USA)
Rosh Kehillah Dina Najman (USA)
Rabbi David Freilech (Australia)
Rabbi Alon Meltzer (Australia)
Rabbi Elisha Salas (Portugal)
Rabbi Ronen Lubitch (Israel)
Rabbi Alain Nacache, Chief Rabbi of Luxembourg
Rabbi Gabriel Negrin, Chief Rabbi of Greece
Rabbi Menachem Sebbag (Netherlands)
Rabbi Zeev Rubins (Germany)
Rabbi Shaul Friberg (Germany)
Rabbi Reuven Kimelman (USA)
Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld (USA)
Rabbi Michael Feuer (Israel)
Rabbi Daniel Goodman (USA)
Rabbi Dr. Mel Gottlieb (USA)
Rabbi Avraham Weiss (USA)
Rabbi Yitzhak Ajner (Israel)
Rabbi Barry Dollinger (USA)
Rabbi Daniel Gertz (USA)
Rabbanit Devorah Evron (Israel)
Prof. Malka Simkovitch (USA)
Rabbi Yonatan Neril (Israel)
Rabbi Ari Montanari (USA)
Rabbi Levi Alter (USA)

Approbation of Rabbi Abraham Skorka

I was extremely pleased to read the Orthodox Rabbis Statement *“To Do Our Lord’s Will in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians.”*

For a variety of reasons—some of which I am aware, such as the profound impression that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s article *“No Religion is an Island”* made on me as well as the Catholic Church’s document *“Nostra Aetate”*, and other reasons known only to God, Who examines the innermost

chambers of the human heart (בּוֹחַן כְּלִיּוֹת וְלֵב)—dialogue with the Christian world became very important to me long ago and I have been active in it ever since I began serving in the Rabbinat.

Hesitation and doubt overwhelmed me at the beginning of this path. The role that Christianity and its teachings played in forming the horrible anti-Semitism that engulfed the Jewish communities of Europe from the Middle Ages up to the terrible Shoah weighed heavily on my mind. Yet I understood that if we sincerely want to overcome the vicious cycles of hate that led to the horrors of the Holocaust, the time had come to fight for fundamental changes in the relationship between Jews and Christians. It also became clear to me that in the reality of true dialogue, in a discourse of empathy, violence has no place. So I initiated dialogues with Catholic priests and leaders of other Christian churches.

The question that bothered me during the first meetings was not whether Christianity is considered idolatry. I had already studied the opinions of many of our rabbinic sages who ruled on this matter. Rather, it was whether it is permissible to cooperate with Christians for the purpose of Tikkun Olam—repairing the world—not just for the sake of making friendly conversation with limited commitments to the problems that plague our societies, but to create a bond with them that could lead to sincere friendship and unqualified commitment to cooperate for the benefit of both individuals and society. The question that was raised in my conscience was whether it was not time to realize the words of Rambam, “And repair the whole world to serve God together” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11: 4) in their fullness, that is, real togetherness. Each one would contribute from his own faith and tradition, but in harmony and partnership in order to prepare the way for peace and brotherhood between all nations and peoples.

I was fortunate to find a friend and partner in this mission. The Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio who became Pope Francis four years ago, travelled with me on this path that we sought to pave together. For nearly 20 years our relationship was one of honest friendship and brotherhood. He showed me feelings of sincere love toward the Jewish People and respect for the State of Israel. He demonstrated these qualities to me not only verbally, but also through the book of conversations that we published together, on 31 television programs that we recorded, and in numerous acts with an unequivocal message showing sincere love with hands outstretched in friendship.

In his article Rabbi Heschel warned then of the necessity of Jews working with Christians to ensure that the Torah’s message not be forgotten in a world growing increasingly nihilistic. This is still true today, which Heschel understood with his prophetic vision. We have reached the hour to intensify our dialogue with Christianity and work with Christians to increase peace, justice, mercy, and the fear of God throughout the world. Over and above all that separates us theologically, both of us believe in a transcendent God Who demands that human beings to act according to these values.

Hence I append my full agreement to this document created by Orthodox Rabbis. Would that it be accepted by all Israel through an internal dialogue having the power to bring together all segments of our divided people so they can succeed in realizing the prophet Zechariah’s and our Talmudic sages’ challenge to us: “Love truth and peace.”

Rabbi Abraham Skorka
Buenos Aires, Argentina
May 2017

**Approbation of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn
Archbishop of Vienna**

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn

I was deeply impressed by the Orthodox Rabbis Statement on Christianity published December 3, 2015 under the title, *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians*. This document expresses what many of us had the privilege to experience during the first gathering of this kind held in May 2015 here in the Domus Galilee in Israel, when we all sang Sh'ma Yisrael' together.

What a sign for our divided world!

May I quote from the Rabbis Statement: "In imitating G-d, Jews and Christians must offer models of service, unconditional love and holiness. We are all created in G-d's Holy Image, and Jews and Christians will remain dedicated to the Covenant by playing an active role together in the redeeming the world." I am spiritually united in an intense way with all of you during these days. May they be a great blessing!

**Cardinal Christoph Schönborn
Vienna, Austria
May, 2017**