

## **Reflections on the Holy Father**

In Synagogue, our Rabbi, born and raised in North Africa, – Morocco, said a *R'fua Shelamah* for the dying Pope, and read Psalm 30. This is one of the highest honors that could be paid to anyone. A prayer for return to health and the reading of Psalms is done when a friend, relative, or somebody important is very ill. For a Jewish congregation to say these prayers on behalf of the Pope struck me as rather remarkable.

I was brought up in an era when we were well aware of the role of the church. The Catholic church had spent 1700 years demonizing the Jewish people, and suggesting that we only be kept alive so that we could be publicly excoriated and tortured for killing the Lord's Son. The church was responsible for the inquisition, the church had a hand in the Thirty Years War, and the church encouraged death, destruction and mayhem during the Crusades, colonialization of Africa and South America as well. The church does not have an enviable record.

The last two Popes, Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II were that much more extraordinary because they turned against the entire tide of history by changing church teachings and reversing the direction of one of the most powerful institutions. Pope John XXIII's prayer of forgiveness to the Jews is one of the most compelling statements ever made by a religious figure. Pope John Paul II continued the work of his predecessor, officially recognizing the State of Israel and reinforcing the understanding that the Jews had their own in the first covenant with G-d.

The Catholic Church has gone from being one of the greatest antagonists to the Jewish people, to one of our greatest respecters and friends. Modern leading church figures have led the way in reforming church doctrine, notwithstanding adolescent protests of the Mel Gibsons of the world.

I serve on the Board of a Foundation which has worked with the Vatican for over ten years to open up the church's considerable collection of Judaica to the world of scholars. The Vatican in Rome has one of the greatest collections of Judaica that the world has ever known. Some of those manuscripts and artifacts have been publicly shown, and others have been cataloged, documented, and microfilmed. The Herbert Rieders Foundation for the Recovery of Objects Judaica has taken the lead worldwide in keeping the dialogue going with the Vatican. When the church recognized the State of Israel, a number of protocols were entered into. One of those protocols was to discuss the Vatican's great collection of Judaica with the Jewish world in order to ensure that the collection was open to scholars and would be fully

documented. It is clear that while that collection still is not as open as it could be and requires further cataloging, much progress has been made.

I have been privileged to have had correspondence taken directly to Pope John Paul II, discussing the matters of Judaica in the Vatican. As a result of this dialogue and communication, the church has officially publicized its willingness to be open to scholars and to continue the publication of lists of Judaica within its possession.

We will continue to work with the Vatican to create a documentary film so that the world of Jewish manuscripts and Judaica can be understood, and so that its significance will be appreciated by the public as well as by scholars. We also hope for the day when there will be more than a symbolic return of this Judaica to the museum in Jerusalem.

It is a sad but true fact that much of the church-owned collection of Jewish books and religious objects were obtained through forced conversion and other unpleasant means that neither side is interested in discussing in any detail. In fact, the church still rejects through its representatives, the notion that it does not have rightful ownership of its vast collection of Judaica. Unfortunately, that is an unpleasant subject which also needs to be discussed along with the role of the church during World War II in remaining silent during the annihilation and slaughter of the 6 million Jews during the Nazi Holocaust. The church silence during those days must be acknowledged and understood.

We mourn the passing of Pope John Paul II, a great leader of the church, and hope that his successors will continue the work of repairing the Vatican's relationship with Israel and the Jewish people.

Our small town Rabbi showed best how to turn the other cheek, something which the Jewish people have learned to do for many centuries as a simple matter of survival. We were reminded at services that he who saves a single soul, it is as though he has saved the entire universe. The man who has served the church so well for over two decades did his part to save the universe, and we can only hope that positive trend will continue.

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