



## Problematic Exclusivist Texts

Rabbi Professor Alan Brill (USA)

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*Rabbi Prof. Alan Brill is the Cooperman/Ross Endowed Chair for Jewish-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University. He is an expert on interfaith relations and author of many books including *Judaism and World Religions: Christianity, Islam, and Eastern Religions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Brill was a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award for research and teaching at Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh in India. This research produced his recent volume *Rabbi on the Ganges: A Jewish Hindu Encounter* (Lexington Books, 2019). His forthcoming book is *A Jewish View of the Trinity, Incarnation, and Salvation* (Fortress Press, 2024).*

Twenty years ago, I wrote a paper which became a widely influential book called *Judaism and Other Religions*, showing that Jewish texts do not present a sharp choice between traditional intolerant exclusivism or non-traditional secular pluralism. Rather, I presented a rich panorama of inclusive, exclusive, and universalist Jewish texts from one extreme to another.

The Talmud has passages that are both pro gentile but also anti gentile. I showed that the tradition has passages that are appreciative of members of other religions, and passages that are not. Jewish law has positions that are humanistic as well as non-humanistic passages. We have to choose the humanistic passages in each case.

I stressed universal and inclusive models as models for today. The jurist who deals in religious law will feel comfortable finding an inclusive place for other religions with a legal definition of believers. The mystic will feel comfortable finding a place for other religions in the universal mystical oneness of the divine beyond all reality. For comprehensiveness, I included Jewish exclusive texts, I went out of my way to include the exclusivist passages rarely discussed in modern times in order to encourage communities to explicitly deal with them by rejecting them.

I reminded people of the exclusivism of certain sections of Kabbalah and Hasidism, denying the humanity of non-Jews or invoking visions of eschatological destruction. Yet, I also showed how the contemporary Chabad Lubavitch movement went from denying souls to gentiles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to thinking, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that all Americans, Jewish and gentile, are one nation under God, working together to redeem the world.



## Background

Before discussing problematic texts further, I want to situate myself. My family comes from Poland having survived the pogroms, antisemitism, and the Holocaust. They followed a Jewish historic pattern of fleeing persecution.

My upbringing was in the tolerance of the United States, where Jews possessed the same rights as Protestants and Catholics, even though Jews were only a small percentage of the population. I live in the New York City area, the largest Jewish city in the world, and was able to take advantage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal tolerance of the United States.

Furthermore, I live in the post-Vatican II era, in which the important 1965 document *Nostra Aetate* renounced antisemitism. The years following *Nostra Aetate* broadly constituted an era of reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity after the Holocaust, with the Christian churches seeking to express their rejection of prior teachings of contempt towards Judaism.

Decades later, Pope John Paul II went further and acknowledged Judaism as a living religion, acknowledged the state of Israel, and acknowledged the tragedy of the Holocaust. I have a doctorate in Catholic theology and currently teach interfaith in a Catholic University. Both of these facts would have been unheard-of 70 years ago.

Just as the Church changed and the United States changed, my Judaism changed from a fearful immigrant traditionalism to a strident Americanized Modern Orthodoxy.

As a native born American, the Jewish language switched from Yiddish to English, my generation attended college, and we lost our fear of gentiles.

I grew up in an era when I expected Judaism to also embrace the changes. My teachers taught me a tolerant universal Judaism. I was never taught any intolerant texts or ideas. And I would have never expected their return in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Return and *Teshuvah* in response

But, the intolerant texts did return in 21<sup>st</sup> century!

In 2016, a document by the Rabbinical Law committee of Conservative Judaism moved my descriptive collection of texts to the prescriptive. They dealt directly with two related issues (1) the return of exclusivist texts to 21<sup>st</sup> century Judaism (2) the extremists in the state of Israel.

*This 2016 document — called a teshuva in Hebrew — is equivalent to the process of writing a fatwa answering a contemporary question within the Islamic faith. The 2016 teshuvah was entitled "The Status of Non-Jews in Jewish Law and Lore Today" and was written by Rabbi Reuven Hammer, who recently passed away.*

The Rabbinical Law committee of Conservative Judaism directly asked: *What is the status of Gentiles in Jewish Law today? How should we deal with statements in traditional Jewish literature that are negative or discriminatory regarding non-Jews?*

The *teshuvah* or rabbinic fatwa answers emphatically that — I quote:

The Torah teaches the equality of all human beings created in the image of God and is positive toward non-Israelites. Rabbinic literature similarly contains numerous positive statements about Gentiles.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that there are passages in rabbinic literature, kabbalah and medieval philosophical works that depict Gentiles in negative terms, as inferior to Jews and sometimes even as less than human.

According to the *Teshuvah*:

Many of these negative statements and depictions can be explained as normal reactions to the exceedingly cruel treatment of Jews by non-Jews, be it the Roman Empire, the Church or others. Some, however, go far beyond that, positing an exclusivist theology.

Dealing with discriminatory laws and negative texts when teaching our tradition to youth and adults can be problematic, to say nothing of how we deal with them when interacting with Gentiles. This has become particularly acute in the Diaspora today where Jews are in constant contact with Gentiles and enjoy equal rights and equal status.

At a time when other religious groups, such as the Catholic Church, are re-examining their attitudes towards Jews and making changes in their dogmas to eliminate negative doctrines, we can hardly do less.

The responsa cites the universal Jewish tradition in which I was raised. It teaches that "if one destroys one person it is accounted to him as if he had destroyed an entire world and if one sustains one life it is accounted to him as if he had sustained an entire world (Sanhedrin 4:6)." I know that Islam has a similar statement in the Quran at 5:32.

This same concept of the equality of all human beings was expressed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Rabbi Ben Azzai. He stated that the verse "When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God (Gen.5:1)" is the most important general rule of the Torah because it shows the divinity of all humanity.

The responsa emphasizes that most Modern Jews were taught and:

"sincerely maintained that Judaism had always taught universalistic ethics only." Prominent authorities such as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh took it for granted that "Love your neighbor" applied to Gentiles. Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz in his Biblical commentaries goes out of his way to stress Judaism's universality.

This was also the approach of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, Rabbi Unterman, and Rabbi Joseph B Soloveitchik.

But the 21<sup>st</sup> century offers new challenges. The responsa continues:

However, in recent years there is a new challenge, the recent statements of radical Jewish groups who produced books lauded by a small number of well-known extremist rabbis in which non-Jews are depicted as being of a lesser species than Jews and in which slaying enemies including young children, is deemed

permissible and even commanded. The so-called Halakhic positions of these rabbis have influenced fanatical groups of extremists and have led to acts of destruction, injury and death.

The *teshuvah* acknowledge that one can find exclusivist and negative passages in the tradition. If one looks, one can justify bad acts from the tradition. But, the *teshuvah* outright condemned these works and all works by exclusivist Jewish groups.

The document declares that:

*all rules discriminating against Gentiles in matters of a civil nature and moral actions are no longer to be considered authoritative in Judaism not only because of the harm they cause to the image of Judaism and to relations with non-Jews, but because they are intrinsically immoral and deter us from attaining the honest virtues to which we aspire as Jews.*

With some satisfaction on my part, the responsa then quotes passages from my books, in which I stated:

Jews have barely begun to look at their attitudes toward other faith, albeit this reluctance was forged in an era of persecution. But they do not look at their own problematic and nasty text about gentiles; they ignore their own traditional visions of destruction of the other faiths at the end of days. They frequently stigmatize other faiths in a totalizing way and call other faiths idolatry, Amalek, or Molekh based on current political attitudes. They judge other faiths by their worst and cite Judaism at its best.

The problem of our era is that some:

Jews consider Jewish extremists as aberrations and non-Jewish extremists as the norm. They cite modern sanitized Jewish approaches that show how wonderful and tolerant Judaism is toward others, and disown their own anti-gentile texts written over the millennia. At the same time, however, they assume that other faiths are shackled to their prior texts as understood in prior ages, and do not allow the possibility that other religions have modern understandings of themselves.

If we are not to descend to the level of simple apologetics, it will be necessary to deal honestly with the sources, to admit that different attitudes existed over the course of the development of Judaism and to candidly criticize and reject certain parts of the tradition while embracing others as representing the Judaism we wish to promulgate and which we believe represent the true core of Jewish belief beginning with the Torah itself.

## **Civil Rights and War**

Turning to the second issue of extremism in Israel. The document also addresses this new reality. I quote:

Unfortunately in Israel an extremely serious situation has arisen in recent times because of the publication of radical books such as... Torat HaMelekh, books

lauded by a small number of well-known extremist rabbis in which non-Jews are depicted as being of a lesser species than Jews and in which slaying Arabs, including young children, is deemed permissible and even commanded....

For the first time in thousands of years, a Jewish State governs the lives of non-Jews. Jews constitute the majority and must deal with the status of the non-Jewish minority. Even though Jewish Law is not the civil law of Israel, it is influential and has been used by State appointed rabbis to make determinations about the rights of non-Jews that are discriminatory such as forbidding renting of rooms to Arab students.. Such negative teachings have led to halakhic decisions condoning violence.

The result has been discrimination and violence against non-Jews and destruction of Gentile houses of worship, both Christian and Muslim, when extremists take it upon themselves to translate what they perceive to be Jewish law into violent action. The situation has become even more complicated due to the politicization of this entire matter in the State of Israel where it has become part and parcel of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

They conclude that "It is therefore imperative that we condemn these new radical works."

Personally, as an American Jew, I find that these Western condemnations of radical positions in Israel are not having an effect. Talk by Western Jews is cheap. Israelis are not concerned with American Jewish views. This is similar to Western Muslims, those in Europe and the United States who may be universalistic but whose thought is not necessary compelling to their home countries.

The Jewish laws of war, collateral damage, and civilian control have never been seriously developed in Jewish law. Jewish always lived under Islam or Christianity. These new violent books are original new reading of the bronze age Biblical books of Joshua and Judges outside of any of the prior Rabbinic tradition developed over the last two millennium.

In America, we can read humanistic interpretation of Jewish law even written by esteemed progressive thinkers such as Michael Waltzer, but they have little weight with the radicals.

### **Other Documents**

This document by the Rabbinical Assembly should not be treated as rare or unique. Many Jewish documents came out at the same time condemning the return to exclusivist texts and bronze age war practices. Many Jewish leaders from progressive to orthodox condemned these views. The ideas of the radical Jewish groups in Israel were also condemned by major Talmudic scholars.

For example, the Elijah Interfaith Institute produced a document called "Affirming the Image of God". Rabbi Arthur Green and I both signed onto this one.

This document, similar to the responsa, starts off:

Recent weeks and months have brought to public attention the issue of Jewish attitudes to non-Jews, as these are found in some traditional sources and halakhah (Jewish religious law), particularly with reference to... [the] book *Torat Hamelekh*. The great liberty with which the author dispenses with the life of non-Jews under various circumstances has become a scandal in the media, a subject for police investigation for incitement, a discussion item on antisemitic websites, and the subject of an appeal to the Supreme Court of Israel.

In our understanding, the creation of humanity in God's image is the great principle, as our sages recognized. We believe this mandates full respect for the infinite value, equality and uniqueness of every human life, for it is created in the image of God. Our Torah's ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace. These and other great principles are the guidelines through which we interpret and teach our tradition.

Love of one's own group should not be equated with the hatred of others. Israel's calling is harmonious with the wellbeing of all humanity. We recognize that there are voices in our tradition that have lost sight of those great principles... It is, therefore, a contemporary educational and halakhic challenge to confront these extremist teachings, to contain them, and to dissent from them publicly, applying the methods of halakhah, classical interpretation and historical study.

Accordingly, we call upon rabbis and educators to take a clear stand against narrow views Jewish particularity, in favor of a broader vision of Judaism's relations to the other. Our scholars stand ready to debate the views under discussion. [We need to be reminded] that "The Lord is good to all, and His compassion extends to all His creatures."

## **Conclusion**

The Responsa and other documents against exclusivist Jewish texts teach us that we need to teach inclusivists and universal positions, and reject exclusivist positions in schools at all levels, and in sermons by major clergy, with the goal to have these moderate positions be internalized at grassroots levels.

Traditional religions travel heavy and do not throw texts away. They may think that they do not use a given problematic text anymore, so they lay it aside, but it returns. And in every generation, we may have to reread it again, and again.

The important point is that the universalism that I was taught when I was in school can always be overturned in a later generation if we are not vigilant in teaching the universal parts of our traditions and openly rejecting the exclusive and prejudicial parts through sensitive contemporary readings.

In conclusion, I will close with a quote from former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (d. 2020), who extolled the power of interfaith understanding. He taught:

"We are blessed. And to be blessed, no one has to be cursed. God's love does not work that way. Today God is calling us... to let go of hate and the preaching of hate, and live at last as brothers and sisters, true to our faith and a blessing to others regardless of their faith, honoring God's name by honoring his image, humankind."

Fidelity to one's own faith need not involve an adversarial attitude to people of other faiths. Creating an inclusive traditional approach that allows for working together is a much more powerful force for building civilization than working alone.