

SHABBAT SERMON
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Pope Benedict and the Artscroll Siddur

I like the Pope ... and that's saying a lot! After all, for more than a thousand years, Popes seemed to personify the enemies of the Jewish people; ghettos, inquisitions, yellow stars ... all that and much more came with Papal blessings. So for a rabbi to be able to say that he likes the Pope marks quite a change in Jewish history and in world history. We live in historic times in terms of Jewish/Catholic relations. What started with Pope John XXIII and blossomed with Pope John Paul, continues in many ways with Pope Benedict. His recent visit to the United States, which included a private meeting with Jewish leaders and a visit to a New York synagogue – only the third Papal visit to a synagogue – signifies the hand of friendship that the Catholic Church now extends. And yet having said this, there was a recent decision by Pope Benedict that caused much pain to the Jewish people. And perhaps a closer look at what the Pope did, combined with a closer look at what some Jews have done and the pain we cause each other, can help provide us with a better understanding of the strange period of time we are in the midst of in the Jewish calendar.

This period of time between the festivals of Pesach and Shavuot is a strange one. Biblically it is known as the period of the Omer – a time when we are mandated to count the days between Pesach and Shavuot – a happy time of the barley harvest for ancient Israel. But strangely enough, as you know, this is not a happy time in the Jewish calendar. This is a time of semi-mourning, a time when we are not supposed to listen to music, when we do not conduct weddings. Why? Says the Talmud: Because it was during this period of time that the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva all died of a plague. That's strange ... that a period of time that is Biblically mandated to be happy, is turned into a period of mourning? But even stranger is the fact that our sages tell us that the reason why the students of Rabbi Akiva were afflicted with a plague was “mipnei shelo nahagu kavod zeh l'zeh – because they did not show proper respect, one for another.” What in the world can that mean? These were students of the greatest Torah scholar, and the students themselves were great Torah scholars! All 24,000 didn't show respect to each other? What did they do ... shoot spitballs at each other in class? Call each other by nicknames?

The late, great Lubavitcher Rebbe provides an insight. You know what it means that they didn't show respect to each other? It means that they didn't show respect to each other's opinions. As students of Torah, learning Torah, there are always disagreements, there are always differences of opinion. But that doesn't mean that one should belittle the other's opinions. The classic example of students of Torah disagreeing are the students of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. We are told that these students disagreed on more than 300 matters of Jewish law. So who was right? The Talmud tells us that a voice from heaven announced: “Eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim chaim – both are the words of the living God.” *Both* are right! And yet, we follow the opinions of the school of Hillel. Why? Our sages say: “Because it was kindly and modest, it

studied its own rulings and those of the school of Shammai, and was even so humble as to mention the actions of the school of Shammai before its own.” Why do we follow the school of Hillel? Because even when they disagreed with the school of Shammai, they showed respect to their opinion. Why did the students of Rabbi Akiva die? Because they showed no respect to the opinion of others.

For centuries, there was a prayer that Catholics recited on Good Friday which was called “The Prayer for the Jews.” In fact, what it was, was a prayer for the conversion of the Jews! The language of the prayer couldn’t have been clearer, couldn’t have been uglier, reading as it did:

“Let us also pray for the perfidious Jews; that our Lord and God take away the evil from their hearts; that they too may acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Lord. Let us pray: Almighty and eternal God who does not exclude from your mercy even Jewish faithlessness: hear our prayers which we offer for the blindness of that people, that acknowledging the light of your Truth which is Christ, they may be delivered from their darkness.”

The prayer was really bad ... the Jews are “perfidious,” there is a veil on our hearts, there is a “blindness,” only by accepting Jesus is there a possibility of our being “delivered from their darkness.”

Even uglier than the words were the actions that it evoked. Down through the centuries, after reciting such a prayer, Christians used to leave their churches and go out on the streets attacking Jews mercilessly. It was only when Pope John XXIII became the leader of the Catholic Church that he toned down the words of the prayer. And then, with the Vatican Council he initiated, the whole prayer was revised, with the Latin service it was a part of done away with. A new era of Catholic/Jewish interfaith relations began.

But there were always some Catholics who had wanted to keep the traditional Latin service. And so, this year Pope Benedict, in reaching out to the traditionalists in the church, allowed for the return of the Latin service, referred to as the Tridentine Mass, and with it a return to the call for our conversion. No, we’re no longer called “blind” or “perfidious” but the prayer is clear when it says:

“Let us pray for the Jews. May the Lord enlighten their hearts to accept Jesus Christ as savior of all men. Eternal and everlasting God, you who desire all your creatures to be saved and know the truth, let Israel be redeemed by passing through the gates of your church.”

I don’t know how Catholics reacted to the return of this prayer, but I do know that Jews were outraged. An editorial in the *Forward* newspaper spoke for many Jews when it said, “The revival of the Tridentine Mass is a grave setback to this reconciliation. There should be no mistaking that: Christian missionizing raises deep and abiding anxiety among Jews of every stripe. It demeans Judaism and ultimately threatens Jewish security.”

I must tell you that I personally do not feel that this prayer “threatens Jewish security.” We are living at a time when the Church can’t force us to do anything we don’t want to do! It wasn’t always like this. I remember when I visited the main synagogue in Rome and right across the street there is a small church. It’s the Church of Sant’Angelo in Pescaria. It was a church that for centuries Jews were forced to go to every Sunday to listen to sermons exhorting them to convert to Christianity. The ears of the Jews were checked to make sure they hadn’t put anything in them to block the sound of the sermons, and Jews who dozed off were hit with sticks by the “loving” attendants. The church still bears a plaque with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah in Hebrew and in Latin: “I stretch out my hand all day to my rebellious people and they take the wrong path.”

Those days are long gone! So why do the words bother so many Jews? Because it shows disrespect to what we believe in. For the past 40 years Jews and Christians have been involved in an interfaith dialogue. What have we been dialoguing about? Not on matters that we agree upon ... there is no need for a dialogue on that. We’ve been discussing things on which we disagree ... a dialogue is based on the idea that while we disagree with each other, we do not negate each other; that we can disagree without being disagreeable. And that we can get along despite our differences, indeed, by showing respect despite our differences. The return of this Prayer for Conversion shows disrespect for our differences, disrespect for our opinions, disrespect for Judaism.

And besides, here in the U.S. a recent Pew survey almost shockingly revealed that in our country 23 million Catholics have left the church ... 10% of all adult Americans are ex-Catholics! So, if the church is looking to save souls, shouldn’t it begin and focus first on their own people? And after it has all of them ... then come knocking on our door! But until then, remember that for Jews, prayers for conversions are not just disagreeable words, they are disrespectful as well.

But I’m sorry to tell you that it’s not only the Catholic Church that has brought back words of a prayer that are objectionable. Some Jews have done the same! The most popular prayer book used in most Orthodox synagogues today is referred to as the Artscroll Prayer book. We have it in our Chapel, but we don’t use it in our sanctuary. There are several reasons why we use it in our Chapel, and several reasons why we don’t use it in the sanctuary. I personally don’t like the Artscroll Prayer book, both for what it adds to the traditional prayers, and for what it leaves out from traditional prayers. What it adds to the traditional prayers is a sentence it has bracketed in the midst of the Aleinu prayer.

The Aleinu prayer is one of our most popular and most significant prayers. Originally only found in the High Holiday service, what it had to say was considered so important that it became the concluding prayer of every prayer service: morning, afternoon and evening. It is, in a very real sense, our doxology, saying as it does:

“It is for us to praise the Lord of all, to acclaim the greatness of the God of creation, who has not made us as the nations of the world, nor set us up as other peoples of the earth, not making our portion as theirs, nor our destiny of that of

their multitudes. For we kneel and bow low before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed by He.”

The prayer is a most powerful one and was found on the lips of many of our peoples’ martyrs down through the ages. But there was one sentence in the Aleinu that caused much trouble for the Christian world. After the words which say that God is to be praised for “not making our portion as theirs, nor our destiny as that of their multitudes,” there was a sentence that said: “For they bow down to void and vanity and pray to a god who does not help.” These words, taken from the Book of Isaiah, were deeply resented by Christians who claimed that the word for “vanity,” in Hebrew “varik,” has the same numerical value as the Hebrew word “yeshu” – the Hebrew name of Jesus. So, in fact, Christians claimed Jews were publicly reciting a prayer denouncing Jesus. Although there were Jews who refuted this accusation, it was felt that for our safety and well-being it was best for those few words to be dropped from the prayer.

And that’s the way it stood for hundreds of years! Jewish prayer books for the most part, left out those words. And then, along came Artscroll and put them back in! In parenthesis, yes, but they are there for your choosing, with a footnote in Artscroll claiming that Jews never took these words as referring to Jesus. But you know what? That’s not really true. The noted Jewish historian and scholar, Dr. Marc Shapiro, writes, “Jews in the Middle Ages believed that “hevel varik” referred to Jesus ... the chasidei Askenaz had written about “hevel varik” referring to Jesus.”

So you tell me: why did these words which caused us such troubles, which were so deeply resented by Christians ... why did Artscroll come along in the 1980’s and put them back in? You know why? Because they could! Because Artscroll was published in the 1980’s in America; America – a country that gave Jews freedom that we had never experienced before ... America, a country with an overwhelming majority of Christians, allows for Jews to say and do whatever we want. And so how do we show our appreciation for that? Artscroll showed it by putting these troublesome words back into the text. In so doing, it is showing disrespect for Christianity just at a time when Christianity has reached out to us.

And as I say to the Catholics who have brought back a negative text about the Jews when their own house is not in order ... I say the same thing to the Jews of Artscroll: before you bring back a text that is perceived as a “put down” of the Catholic church, shouldn’t you first make sure your own house is in order? In recent years the ultra-Orthodox community has found itself confronting one scandal after another. This week our country’s largest kosher meat producer, Agriprocessors, owned by Chassidic Jews, was raided by federal agents who found hundreds of illegal immigrants working there, and illegal narcotics being processed there. Last month I spoke of a well known Chassidic rabbi, head of the Spinka Dynasty, who is the subject of a 45 page Federal indictment, filled with 37 criminal charges of tax fraud and money laundering. Then there was the ultra-Orthodox kosher butcher in Monsey who was caught selling non-kosher chickens. And then there were the five members of the Chassidic community in Rockland County, NY who were charged with systematically defrauding the Federal and State governments of tens of millions of dollars in student loans for students who didn’t exist! And these are not isolated cases. As one New York white collar defense attorney put it:

“The problem in the observant community, however, is not merely occasional nor does it often make headlines. Daily in metropolises around the country yarmulke wearing criminal defendants appear before the bar of justice. Some prisons – especially New York, Los Angeles and Miami – have daily minyans, visiting rabbis, kosher food, classes and Shabbat meals. The most common charge is fraud: against businessmen and run-of-the-mill citizens alike; most frequently involving victims outside the Jewish community, against the government, against insurance carriers, against banking institutions, health care fraud, money laundering and stock swindling.”

Having been persecuted and taken advantage of by the authorities in our East European days, there is still an element in the Orthodox community that has brought that disdain for governmental laws along with them to America. And Artscroll is part of the problem. Those who put together the Artscroll Siddur not only put in words that had been left out for years, they also took out verses that had been found in our prayer books for centuries; verses referred to as “The Prayer for the Government.” There is no Prayer for the Government in the Artscroll Siddur, and to quote Dr. Marc Shapiro once again, “How did the Hareidi (ultra-Orthodox) community come to the view that the Prayer for the Government was not ‘frum’ (religious) and thus is neither recited nor included in the Siddur.” The fact of the matter is, as early as the 10th century we already find that our prayer books had the Prayer for the Government. The greatest sage of the 19th century, the Chatam Sofer, denounced those who tried to abolish this prayer. Jews who prayed for the welfare of Napoleon and Franz Joseph and Czar Nicholas can’t pray for the government of the United States ... a government unlike any other in all our history? Far better than putting in words from the Aleinu which many found offensive toward Christianity would have been to keep a Prayer for the Government in its rightful place, which would have sent an important lesson to our fellow Jews.

So you see ... you can be great students of Torah like Rabbi Akiva’s students were, but that’s not good enough. You’ve got to learn to respect the opinions of others. You can have great religions like Judaism and Christianity but that’s not enough. You’ve got to respect each other’s opinions. Indeed, in our own country liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats ... there have always been differences but the differences were always expressed with a measure of respect. We’ve lost that ... we ought to bring it back. This Friday is Lag B’Omer, the 33rd day in the counting of the Omer; a day of rejoicing and celebrating, because on this day the plague stopped. Rabbi Akiva’s students stopped dying. And I guess they all stopped being disrespectful to each other, focusing instead on what their teacher, Rabbi Akiva, considered the greatest mitzah of all: “V’ahavta l’reicha kamocho – to love thy neighbor as thyself.”

May we take this lesson to heart, fulfilling the hope expressed by the Psalmist: “Yiheu l’ratzon umiari fi v’hegyon libi l’fonecha Hashem tzuri v’goali – May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart find favor before You, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Amen.