Plenary Session

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Reconciliation in Judaism and Christianity

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Tzedakah as a Jewish Route to Reconciliation and Responsible Citizenship

The theme of this conference, as we all know, is "Towards Reconciliation in a Broken World: Jewish and Christian Contributions to Responsible Citizenship." The task placed before me is to set up the Jewish discussion of this theme, a task complicated by the fact that, although as a citizen of the western world, I understand and applaud what all the terms of this title mean, as a Jew, I need to undertake some significant acts of translation to find deeply rooted, authentic resources for addressing it. This is the opposite of the Christian, and especially the Roman Catholic reality. I thank Judith Frishman for her opening the Jewish side from a philosophical perspective yesterday.

For most of Jewish history, Jews were not allowed by the majority cultures among whom they lived to be citizens. Therefore, "responsible citizenship" can only be looked at as an evolving, modern concept in Jewish life, one that was very fraught as Jews sought to prove their rights to their newly achieved citizenship in nineteenth-century Europe and America, and in the face of persistent anti-semitism throughout the Christian world. Glass ceilings, social discrimination, stereotyping, continue in some corners even today. The pre-modern equivalents of "responsible citizenship" were inward looking, focused on the needs of members of the Jewish community almost exclusively. This creates a tension that will inform my words today.

We all recognize that we live in a broken world, but we understand rather differently why it is broken and how repair will happen. I will return to this.

Finally, "Reconciliation." This is where I'll begin, as it is key to understanding our endeavor. This is not a term in the standard Jewish theological vocabulary. Contrary to the impression of many Jewish scholars a century ago, including in this city, the primary language of Jewish theology is Hebrew, maybe Aramaic, but not German – or today, English. When one looks up "reconciliation" in a modern Hebrew-English dictionary, one finds an abstract noun, התפייסות, referring to a reconciliation between two opposing views, as in something necessary before signing a trade agreement.[1] But note that this, like many abstract nouns in Hebrew, is a very modern term.[2] The verb, from which this modern noun

[1] http://www.morfix.co.il/reconciliation. Compare Google translate. Alternatives are פיוס, from the same root and carrying much the same meaning, and השלמה, with the sense of "making things whole, creating peace," and רצוי, "satisfaction."

[2] It doesn't appear at all in the historical dictionary of the Hebrew Language: http://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/Pages/PMain.aspx, consulted May 22, 2018.

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derives, does appear in early rabbinic texts, but with the sense of “to appease or pacify,”[3] i.e., to make amends with someone, usually as a required prerequisite to seeking their forgiveness and repairing a relationship. I emphasize, “prerequisite.”

Many Jews take this requirement very seriously. Mishnah Yoma (8:9) famously teaches: “ עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לַחֲבֵרוֹ, אֵין יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, עַד שֶׁיְּרַצֶּה אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ – [The rituals of] Yom Kippur do not effect atonement for transgressions between one person and another until the [sinner] has satisfied [i.e., received the forgiveness of] the person sinned against.” Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the 10th of Tishrei (in early autumn) is the day on which the Jewish community collectively stands before God and seeks divine forgiveness for personal and communal sins. This is the absolute annual due date, if you will, for repentance, with no extensions. Thus, the process of introspection followed by approaching anyone one has wronged, even potentially, and seeking their forgiveness must precede this day. This is not just formulaic; often it is very real.[4] Of course, there are sins we commit that aren’t interpersonal, sins against ourselves and sins directly against God (including against God’s created world), for which we must also repent and turn to God asking forgiveness.

Of course, this is not a process that should happen only as the “due date” looms. Jewish weekday prayers, beginning with those recited the moment Yom Kippur ends and then throughout the year, ask God to help us perceive our sins, to repent for them, and pray for forgiveness. And even on Yom Kippur itself, the confessional prayers prod us to recall other personal and communal sins; they confess entire alphabets of sins, as if to say to God, “You know what we should be confessing; here is the raw material. Form it into the proper words for us, even when we cannot.” Reconciliation with our fellow humans, then, is in Jewish understanding a necessary prerequisite to reconciliation with God.

But this process of reconciliation is mostly local and personal in scope. Jewish tradition does teach, specifically regarding sinful behavior, that “כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה, All Jews are responsible for each other,” a teaching that the Talmud restricts to situations where one has the ability to reprove and fails to.[5] These traditional Jewish texts did not imagine that this might operate as an interreligious dynamic. Jews either lived in isolation or suffered persecutions. Jews had no power to reprove their neighbors’ sins and hence no responsibility for them. Reconciliation with God could not be dependent on this dynamic. It is this traditional understanding that continues to be conveyed in orthodox prayer books.

However, modern non-Orthodox liturgies do occasionally, inconsistently, add elements of concern for relationships with the wider world community. For example, 1970s American Reform and Conservative liturgies, in seeking to come up with an English alphabet of sins to confess, included “xenophobia,”[6] fear of strangers, perhaps only because English offers few alternatives beginning with “x.” In a creative meditation on sorts of sins that we commit and might want to confess and repent for,

[3] Jastrow, p. 1166 (pi’el and hitpa’el).

[4] See Shira Telushkin, “I Forgive You, I Forgive You Not: What Happens when Yom Kippur Stops Being Formulaic and Starts Getting Real,” *Tablet* (September 18, 2015), http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/193039/i-forgive-you-not. Alternatively, Tablet Magazine’s podcast “Unorthodox” ran an episode on September 3, 2015, called “Hard to Say I’m Sorry” which includes Telushkin’s story (http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/193270/hard-to-say-im-sorry).

[5] *Sifra*, *Behukotai,* 2,7,5 on Leviticus 26:37; expanded in B. Shevuot 39a-b.

[6] *Gates of Repentance, The New Union Prayerbook for the Days of Awe* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1978), 270, 513 (Kol Nidre and Neilah, but not in the morning service). Its predecessors dropped the alphabetical list entirely. *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1972), 403, etc., lists “we are xenophobic” in each service.

this Reform liturgy does name issues of poverty, violence, and pollution.[7] While a variation of this second list appears in the 2015 Reform liturgy,[8] "xenophobia" disappears as a named sin there as well as in the 2010 Conservative movement update. This Conservative liturgy's alphabetized list now proclaims "we are e**x**tremists," and makes no mention of xenophobia.[9] Thus, even for more liberal Jews, the concern for reconciliation with non-Jews is not in the stable parts of the liturgy, but rather in the translations, for reasons of e**x**pedience, in additions that appear in one generation and disappear in the next.

One of the elements of the High Holy Day liturgy that has become stable is the prose poem known by its first words, *Unetaneh Tokef*.[10] This grand text presents a dramatic image of God's sitting in judgment on humanity during this season, writing in the Book of Life the fate of each person for the coming year, based on their deeds and penitence. While it could be argued, correctly, that when rabbinic texts speak of "all humanity," they are usually thinking only about "all Jews," the universal elements of the opening lines of this poem are striking. God, sitting on the throne of judgement, opens the book of remembrance in which each person's deeds have been inscribed. Then, amid celestial fear and trembling, "כל באי עולם יעברון לפניך כבני מרון -- All that lives on earth will pass before [God] like a flock of sheep," and God, like a shepherd, will judge "נפש כל חי - each living being," determining the fate of "כל בריאה – everything in creation," writing it down on Rosh Hashanah and sealing it on Yom Kippur. This reiteration of universal language is striking and unusual.[11]

It has some echo though in what may be an older prayer.[12] After *Unetaneh Tokef* comes the *kedushah*, the angelic praise of God; and in this season, this liturgy receives some extensive and eschatologically oriented expansions, in three separate paragraphs. While the second and third paragraphs become specific to Israel, the first of these is universal, asking poetically that all whom God has created come to be in fear and awe of God, uniting to do God's will.[13] This is coherent with the language we noted in *Unetaneh Tokef*. However, its intent is somewhat ambiguous. I have argued that,

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[7] *Gates of Repentance*, 328-9, in the morning service.

[8] *Mishkan Hanefesh for the Days of Awe: Yom Kippur* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2015), 89, 308-309. On p. 309, it includes a section titled "I reflect on the harm I have done to the world around me." The specifics of each list reflect its times.

[9] *Mahzor Lev Shalem for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2010), 235, etc.

[10] Literally translated, "Let us express forcefully," referring to the "sacredness of the day" on which God ascends on the divine throne of majesty and proceeds to judge.

[11] "Let us speak of the sacred power of this day – profound and awe-inspiring. On it Your sovereignty is celebrated…/ Truly, You are Judge and Prosecutor, Expert and Witness…/ You… will open the book of remembrance, which speaks for itself, for each person's hand has signed the page./ The great shofar will be sounded and the still small voice will be heard. Angels will be alarmed… - for even the hosts of heaven are judged; no one is innocent in Your sight./ All that lives on earth will pass before You like a flock of sheep./ As a shepherd examines the flock, making each sheep pass under the staff, so You will review and number and count, judging each living being, determining the fate of everything in creation, inscribing their destiny./ On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on the Fast of the Day of Atonement it is sealed!..." (Translation adapted from *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, 143.

[12] If one may judge by frequency of appearance of the older prayer in the geniza. *Unetaneh Tokef* is rare in the manuscripts digitized to date on the Friedberg Genizah Project site, while this older prayer appears at least seventeen times.

[13] *Mahzor Lev Hadash*, 149: [Therefore,] ADONAI our God, instill Your awe in all You have made, and fear of You in all You have created, so that all You have fashioned revere You, all You have created bow in recognition, and all be bound together, carrying out Your will wholeheartedly. For we know that true sovereignty is Yours, power and strength are in Your hands, and Your name is to be revered beyond any of Your creations.

Note that the lead in to this prayer in Musaf is escatological and either inclusive, as in *Mahzor Lev Hadash*'s translation ("may You rule over a united humanity," 148) or perhaps just speaking of God's universal rule, as in the Sacks-Koren translation ("and will rule over all that is, alone," 862).

although this paragraph standing alone sounds inclusive, it must be read in the fuller context of all three which end up much more exclusivist.[14]

Unetaneh Tokef continues with an extended meditation on the stark possibilities for the divine decree in the coming year, “who will live and who will die…who will be at peace and who will be troubled…who will be impoverished and who will be enriched.” Immediately, the declaration rings out, “ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה – but penitence, prayer, and charity transform the harshness of the decree.”[15] Penitence, prayer, and charity then play a role in reconciliation. Penitence and prayer need no elaboration, but *tzedakah*, charity, is an element that has not previously entered my discussion. It is more active; it effects concrete change on the interpersonal human level.

So what is *tzedakah*? Charity is an inadequate translation of the term. As we know, “charity” comes from the Latin *caritas*, meaning self-giving love, a characteristic of God. In Christian terms, because this love can be and should be directed to one’s neighbor, it results in acts of self-giving of various sorts. The movement goes from the individual outward, and speaks to the virtue of the individual. As humans emulate God, it becomes a human characteristic.

Tzedakah, in contrast, is an abstract noun based on the more concrete term *tzedek*, and the word in both forms, translated as “righteousness,” is often paired with *mishpat*, justice. The first instance of this is God’s statement that He should reveal his plans about Sodom and Gemorrah to Abraham:

וְאַבְרָהָם הָיוֹ יִהְיֶה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְעָצוּם וְנִבְרְכוּ־בוֹ כֹּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ. כִּי יְדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יְצַוֶּה אֶת־בָּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הָבִיא ה' עַל־אַבְרָהָם אֵת אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר עָלָיו

> Since Abraham is about to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him. For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Eternal by doing what is *just and right*, in order that the Eternal may bring about for Abraham what He has promised. (Gen. 18:18-19)

The key to this statement is God’s interest in giving Abraham an opportunity to demonstrate what it is to keep God’s way by “doing what is just and right.” Abraham’s descendants are to know and do, actively, *tzedakah umishpat*, what is just and right. And it is this verb “to do” that is constantly associated with *tzedakah*. *Tzedakah* is a state of activity, not a matter of attitude, though one might argue that a proper attitude helps motivate the activity.

Maimonides, in the twelfth century, taught that one must be more careful to fulfill the commandment of *tzedakah* than any other positive commandment because it is the indicator of a *tzaddik*, a righteous person, as indicated by God’s statement about Abraham in Genesis.[16] How should one fulfill it? Maimonides abstracts from scattered talmudic teachings to develop his famous eight levels of tzedakah. From highest to lowest these are:

- To make the person financially independent through a gift, interest free loan, business partnership, or creating a job.
- A gift given in secret where neither recipient nor benefactor know each other.

[14] “Jewish Liturgical Memory and the Non-Jew: Past Realities and Future Possibilities,” in *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, ed. Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), 172.

[15] Translations from, or adapted from *Mahzor Lev Hadash*, 142-143.

[16] *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor* 10:1.

- A gift where the benefactor knows the recipient, but the recipient does not know the benefactor. This is fitting if the authorities distributing tzedakah cannot be trusted.
- A gift where the recipient knows the benefactor but the benefactor does not know the recipient.
- A gift where both recipient and benefactor know each other, but the gift is given before it is requested.
- A gift given only after it is requested.
- A smaller than appropriate gift given with good grace.
- A gift given unwillingly.[17]

The principles underlying this list are most important and speak directly to our topic of reconciliation. How does one "do justice"? Ideally, by correcting an injustice and improving the world, by removing poverty at its source, by enabling the others to support themselves. In addition, one must be mindful of interpersonal dynamics. Waiting for the recipient to request the gift, might move the same outlay from number one or two to six. Creating a situation that embarrasses the recipient is also a concern. The insistence on anonymity here means that the recipients need not turn their faces away when meeting their neighbors. But note that all eight are still *tzedakah*!

Maimonides framed his discussion entirely in terms of helping a fellow Jew, but it can be universalized. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that Judaism today lives in a tension between the universal and the particular. He quotes Avishai Margalit as distinguishing between morality, as "referring to the universal principles we use in dealings with humanity in general," and ethics, as referring to relationships on the particular level. *"Tzedek* and *mishpat* belong to morality" in their being about justice, matters of respect and humiliation.[18] Ethics, Sacks associates with a different Hebrew term, *<u>h</u>esed*, a word that correlates more closely with charity in its associations with love or lovingkindness, but one that still refers to interpersonal acts in Jewish tradition.

Why does our line from *Unetaneh Tokef* mention *tzedakah* only? Perhaps it is as simple as the demands of the poetic language, to keep the line short and because of the assonance created by a third word beginning with a dental consonant and ending with –ah, following *teshuvah* (repentance) and *tefillah* (prayer). Perhaps the word is meant to allude to the entire complex of terms associated with it so frequently in the Bible, not just *mishpat*, justice, but also at times *<u>h</u>esed*, lovingkindness.[19] But key here is still that failure to work for justice in the world by acts of *tzedakah*, by taking care of others in our society, is itself an egregious sin. Ameliorating the divine decree, in general, on Yom Kippur, and reconciling with God can be significantly aided by not just thinking of others, by loving them, but by doing one's best to help them most constructively. Thus, we can argue from Jewish sources that a precondition to reconciliation with God is living a moral life and seeking reconciliation with the greater world.

How might Jews envision that full reconciliation though? The historically authentic answer is, in messianic terms. The prophetic visions name that which is lacking still in today's world: universal worship of God, peace and prosperity. The kabbalists attributed the brokenness in our world to a cosmic cataclysm at the time of creation. They saw the Jewish task, through strict adherence to God's

[17] *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor* 10:7-14.
[18] Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 51, citing Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 8.
[19] Jer 9:23, Hosea 2:21, Ps 33:5, Ps 141:5, Prov 21:21.

commandments, to be to effect a repair of the divine realm that would in turn lead to a transformation of our world. They called this *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world. This may be a mode of reconciliation, but it is not an activist "responsible citizenship" in the sense envisioned by the organizers of this conference.

It is only in the 20th century that *tikkun olam* took on new and secularized meanings, popularized among liberal Jews and referring less to the result of obedience to Torah as it had been traditionally interpreted, than to the result of engagement in social justice. *Tikkun olam* came to apply to every imaginable sort of social issue.[20] Under this umbrella, today, the Jewish community acts as best it can to address the moral and ethical challenges facing our world. We do this as *ba'alei tzedakah*, as people who give generously of ourselves and our possessions, but also as voters, as community activists, as members of our greater communities. The list of headings of the sorts of issues being addressed by the (American) Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, tells the story:[21]

- Economic Justice
- Environment
- Civil Rights
- Immigration
- Women's Rights
- Public Health
- Church-State Issues
- Interfaith Affairs
- International Issues

There are certainly large elements of *tzedakah* and *hesed* involved in these projects that address elements of our broken world. They seek a world in which people will reconcile with each other and with God. And many of these express "responsible citizenship" in the global sense.

There are many ways that liberal Jews and Judaism have challenged more traditional Jews to think differently about the world and their role in it although Orthodox advocacy in the United States remains mostly self-interested. An exception may be deeper involvement in interfaith dialogue, especially around social justice issues. For example, protests against the Trump administration treatment of migrant children last week resulted in a joint statement presenting a united front across the American Jewish world. Orthodox Jews may not term this *tikkun olam*, but they find other resources in Jewish tradition to achieve similar ends. As a mandate to reconciliation, *tzedakah*, Maimonides' most important commandment, may indeed be such a route.

[20] Jonathan Krasner, "The Place of Tikkun Olam in American Jewish Life," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs* (November 1, 2014), http://jcpa.org/article/place-tikkun-olam-american-jewish-life1/.
[21] https://rac.org/advocacy-activism.