

Covering the Cross; Discovering Respect

Message from
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There was tension amongst the early arrivees that morning. It was a technical problem, and a symbolic one. The blinds had caught, and the cross was out. And the congregation was uneasy.

Through the generosity of the Hurlbut Church, the Hebrew Congregation of Chautauqua has a home for Shabbat services every summer. Yes, it is a synagogue in a church. And yes, we do cover up the cross. But that morning the covering had gotten stuck. And we didn't know how to get it un-stuck.

Out of nowhere appeared a man in a tee-shirt and blue jeans. He showed up with a ladder. He clamored up to the top of the church. He managed to get the cross covered. By the time I came over to thank Reverend Ted Anderson, Hurlbut Church's pastor, he was already off putting the ladder away. The repair was not complete. A bit of the cross still showed. But almost no one minded. For most of us, the visible effort to help and understand our needs far outweighed the still visible fragment of wood.

What an act of grace and respect! Another man could have said: oh, what's the harm. Just leave it be for now. But Reverend Anderson's help that morning demonstrated an extraordinary appreciation of the nuances -- and sensitivities -- of the congregation that was a guest in his house of worship. We are distinct religions, Judaism and Christianity, bonded by history, linked together through similarities and, indeed, some family ties, but separate in the symbols we use to approach the same God. It seems simple to us sometimes. But it does take sensitivity to remember that.

The sensitivity shown by Reverend Ted Anderson is sorely lacking in other quarters. The other day, a congregant handed me a flyer pulled off of the bulletin board in her apartment building. The flyer reads: "Mikveh Yisrael: If you would like

to.. fellowship with those who believe in the prophetic destiny of Israel....." It goes on to invite people to attend "Erie's first Messianic Jewish Congregation."

Just a week earlier I had done a presentation for Brevelier Village. A woman there told me of an event her church hosted, with different faiths present, Protestants, Catholics and Jews. I asked who was there, and she said: "No, it wasn't the two synagogues in Erie. It was the other one, the one in Northeast."

Actually, I now know that it is Harborcreek. But whatever the address, the "Messianics" are here. They are organizing. They are claiming to be Jews.

It is important to remember that there are several different groups like this, with subtle distinctions between them. Jews for Jesus are not the same as Messianic Jews, who are not the same as Hebrew Christians. Some are more aggressive in recruiting and conversion efforts. But they share an ideology. They all claim, in essence, that you can be Jewish and Christian at the same time. They are wrong. And they are rude.

So I want to share with you some things that I find it helpful to keep in mind when dealing with these groups. Call them "talking points," although the first one is to try not to talk to these people at all. They are armed with barbs at the heart of our faith, and they are dangerous.

* Jews agree on very few things. (You know the old saying: "two Jews, three opinions.") But we do **all** agree on this: the Messiah has not yet come.

* The Messiah may or may not be a descendant of David, s/he may or may not be a single individual (Reform Judaism speaks of the dawn of a Messianic Age, rather than a single person who will come and solve all the world's problems). But the Messiah -- or Messianic Age -- will be brought about by a human being (or human beings) doing God's will -- **not** by a relative of God's. The absolute incorporeality of divinity is one of the cardinal principles of Judaism. (In the prayer *Yigdal* we sing: "*ein lo d'mut haguf, v'eino guf*," asserting that God has "neither a body nor the image of a body.")

* Jesus was, indeed, a Jew, but his followers, if not him, made claims that

were incompatible with Judaism. And so Christianity is not the religion *of* Jesus. It is the religion *about* Jesus.

* Jews may believe many different things about God -- or not believe in God -- and remain Jews. But a Jew who embraces the core concept, the very defining element of another religion has, in effect, converted from Judaism.

* There is a word in the English language for someone who follows the Biblical religion of ancient Israel until the time of Jesus, and then follows Jesus. That person is called a "Christian."

* We respect the integrity of Christianity as an authentic path to God, and believe that the righteous people of all faiths will earn a place in the World to Come, whatever that is. (We also tend to believe that anyone who claims to know details about the afterlife is probably trying to sell a book.) We expect -- indeed, we demand -- that respect in return.

* Anyone who tells you that everything that they believe is right, and everything that you believe is wrong, and they are telling you this out of love -- that's not love. That's arrogance.

* Please remember this above all: the best defense of Jewish identity and Jewish integrity... is not indifference or a shrug that one group in Harborcreek is not threat to us. The best response is a good Jewish education. For children and for adults, the opportunities are there. We have our own teachings -- about salvation, about suffering, about redemption and righteousness.

In early March, the founder of an organization called Jews for Judaism will be coming to Erie. This is a group dedicated to combating the cults and missionaries who need to prop their faith up by putting other faiths down. I am glad they are coming. Their timing is good.

But for me, personally, when plunged into religious confrontation, I carry with me a different image, of cooperation and tolerance. Of sensitivity and respect. Of Ted Anderson, up on a ladder, covering up the cross in his own church. And I know... that we really can all get along. And if anything, his deed, not all the talk about the Messiah from these fake Jews, was a real taste of the Messianic Age.