

Faith in conversat



Tara K. Dix

“I think the world needs Jews. We have something that is unique to us that we have taught and lived and died for, and it deserves to continue.” Rabbi Herman Schaalman is both an ardent advocate of his Jewish tradition and a 50-year veteran of the sometimes painful, sometimes wondrous conversation between Jews and Christians.

Yet for all the theological issues posed by interreligious dialogue, Rabbi Schaalman describes his experience not as a series of carefully worded official statements but of unlikely friendships.

When faced with apparent setbacks, from the controversy surrounding Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* to a Vatican document that referred to non-Christian religions as “deficient,” Rabbi Schaalman is hopeful: “I think the very fact that over the last few decades we’ve had these sometimes very profound encounters with each other across religious lines is one of the most important and reassuring strands in the tapestry of our time.”

Schaalman is rabbi emeritus of Emmanuel Congregation in Chicago and has taught at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, a United Methodist school in Evanston, Illinois, since 1957. He and his wife, Lotte, have been married for more than 60 years.

THE EDITORS INTERVIEW RABBI HERMAN SCHAALMAN

How did you originally get involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue?

The obvious answer is to begin with my own life experience, having been born in Germany and having to leave in 1935 because of Nazism, never really to return. That experience gave me an incentive to try to find points of contact between Jews and Christians that would make it impossible or nearly impossible for anything like the Shoah to happen again.

But there was a tremendous gap between Christians and Jews in their understanding of each other, and this goes for Jews as well as for Christians, because historically Jews have had to view Christians as hostile, threatening, and dangerous.

Because increasing awareness of the Shoah has become the main impulse of my entire theological thinking, it became inescapable that I would address Christianity and work in some fashion on trying to narrow the gap between the two systems.

You mentioned “the Shoah.” Is that the same as the Holocaust?

Holocaust is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word that means the total burning of an offering, and I totally reject that definition, as if we Jews were an offering that was totally consumed. A Presbyterian theologian coined that term, I believe. It’s become the standard word to use, and I don’t like it.

Shoah is a Hebrew word that means devastating storm, like a tsunami, or worse. We don’t have a good word because it’s unprecedented that the biology of a person should doom him or her to extinction—not any flaw in a person’s behavior or character, just biology.

You grew up in Germany in the 1920s and ’30s. What do you remember about the relationship between Christians and Jews before you left?

At the time there were about 70 million Germans, of whom about 570,000 were Jews. This is fewer Jews than in Los Angeles today. So the sheer numerical disproportion itself already induced the sense of being singled out and endangered.

I lived in Munich, and Munich was very Catholic. There was a Roman Cath-

olic church in our neighborhood, of course, and it was within a few blocks of our home. When walking with my father, as soon as we reached the block with the church, he would go on the other side of the street. He would put a distance between us and it. This has remained a very strong memory in my life.

I was beaten up when I was about 7 or 8 years old coming home from school. My own gang—all non-Jewish boys because there weren’t any Jews—beat me up. And when I finally got out of the pile and asked them what had gotten into them, they told me they had just learned that I had killed Christ. I had no idea what that meant, so my father explained what lay beneath this kind of hostility.

Of course we became friends again, but I never forgot.

Were things any different in the United States when you came here for seminary in 1935?

The fact that there were many more Jews here already set a different kind of a framework. I’ll tell you a story that, in a way, shapes the whole issue.

I arrived in New York just before Labor Day, and my relatives there decided that they would take me to Coney Island, because it was closing after Labor Day. The first thing I saw at Coney Island was a huge advertisement for Sunkist oranges on a sign with vertical columns that showed different pictures as they rotated. The second or third rotation was in Yiddish, and I saw Hebrew letters on it. I got so scared, because of course in Germany we tried to hide anything that would indicate a place was Jewish. I was sure that someone would do something violent.

Well, we walked on a couple of blocks, and there was apparently some kind of an incident. One of my relatives went over to take a look and came back and said that a few Jews had just beat up a Nazi.

I thought he must have been wrong; it had to be the other way around: The Nazis beat up the Jew. I couldn’t understand that Jews could beat anyone up.

When did you first get involved in more formal conversations with Christians?

I was sent to Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1941 for my first assignment as a rabbi. I had never met a Baptist or an Episcopalian. I

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don't even think I knew they existed. But there was a ministers' association, and for some reason or other they invited me to participate. I was very, very meticulous in attending, never missing because this was an education of a sort I had never had before.

One day we were meeting—always in a church, of course—and discussing a book by a fairly well-known liberal Methodist, a bishop in California, I believe. As we were leaving the church, I turned to one of the Methodist ministers who knew me quite well by this time. I think I'd even spoken in his church once. I asked, "Can I be saved?"

We walked eight blocks in silence, and finally he stopped very abruptly, turned to me, and said, "Goddamn it, there's got to be a way, you're such a nice fellow." He just felt personally close enough to me that he wanted me to be saved without conversion.

Is it such personal relationships and friendships that often start the dialogue, rather than organizations issuing statements and that sort of thing?

Certainly. The fact that I had a profoundly personal relationship with Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago is to this day inexplicable to me. We were very close personal friends, to the extent that he would sometimes talk to me about things he wouldn't talk to anybody else about. And it made me feel that I really was his brother.

Was the closeness of your relationship with the cardinal a reflection of greater friendship between Catholics and Jews?

First of all, I would like to point out that the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, is coming up. To this day I sometimes read passages in it, and I'm just overwhelmed



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that an organization, an institution, a world like Roman Catholicism could have taken that kind of stand in the concluding months of 1965.

What is so amazing about it?

The church took a radical departure from its traditional stand of defaming Jews and presenting Judaism as a fading or already overtaken kind of relation to God. It also affirmed that there are two covenants, and that God does not go back on his promise to Israel. More specifically it said that one can no longer teach that the Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus.

These were enormous departures, and I have felt on a purely personal level that this teaching puts an onus on me.

What do you mean by that?

If Roman Catholics are prepared to accept this new way of looking at me, then I, too, have a corresponding responsibility and opportunity and challenge to review what I think about Christians. In light of our history I have every reason as a Jew to be suspicious of Christians. But as far as I'm concerned, *Nostra Aetate* is not only a major opportunity but also an irresistible invitation, an urgent invita-

tion, for me to review my own attitudes and my own stance. So I feel compelled to take part in this dialogue.

How did Pope John Paul II contribute to Jewish-Catholic dialogue?

On matters Jewish he was clearer and more positive and forthcoming than any of the preceding occupants of the chair of St. Peter. He made a statement that nobody made before: that anti-Semitism is a sin. The fact that the Vatican is now diplomatically related to the State of Israel is another step forward.

In light of John Paul's openness, how do you interpret the 2000 document *Dominus Iesus*, which many saw as a step backward?

I don't ever expect progress to be steady and uninterrupted, and I fully understand that a community as massive as the Roman Catholic Church is itself in the process of getting acquainted with a totally new way of thinking about Jews and Judaism.

So I can understand if there are from time to time seeming fractures, even regressions. That's something that I think would happen in any transformation as radical and deep as the one that Roman Catholicism and Christianity as a whole are undergoing. I realize that some fear the distinction between Judaism and Christianity is being lost.

I don't think Christian-Jewish relations depend on Christianity giving up its core convictions. But maybe the tone could change, or words could be introduced, so that it would be easier for those who are not part of Christianity to feel accepted and understood.

In your experience what is inter-religious dialogue all about?

First of all, *dialogue* is a very special word that I take exceedingly seriously. I don't call any ordinary conversation a dialogue. In order to be in dialogue,

I need to risk myself and be vulnerable with my partners. If I cannot do that, then there's no dialogue. There may be conversation, even good, important conversation, but it is not dialogue.

I have found that my vulnerability has invited Christian partners to be similarly vulnerable. I often think that my relationship with Christians is one of the reassuring elements in our contemporary scene that keeps me from despair, that helps me really be able to hope.

Can dialogue between Jews and Christians include prayer?

If we were both using exclusively the so-called traditional vocabulary, I think it would be difficult, but there's one happy possibility. Since Christianity needs the Jewish Bible, it is possible to pick words and ideas within that shared tradition and at least to begin there. I would hope that we would not stop there but could find modern language, expressive of our current experience and condition, that we could also include.

Do any occasions of prayer with Christians stand out for you?

Just before Cardinal Bernardin's death, one of his priests called me and said the cardinal wanted me to conduct a

memorial service in the cathedral. I was stunned. Most rabbis won't even go into a church, let alone to do a religious act.

I consulted with a few people, and it became clear that this was a historic moment in the life of the two religious communities. So I accepted. Not only was it the most difficult single religious act I ever performed, but I had to keep in mind continuously that a large portion of the Jewish community would be absolutely aghast at my doing a Jewish liturgical act in a Roman Catholic cathedral.

But it was one of the most profound religious experiences of my life. And the very fact that it was totally unprecedented, and as far as I know has not had any sequel either, really is evidence both of the distance and the possibilities of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

When asked to speak to Christians now, what do you talk about?

If given the choice, I talk about the Shoah, because it is for me the turning point of the eons. I consider the Shoah in terms of its ultimate consequences to be similar to Sinai and Golgotha.

One of the problems I have is that most of my colleagues, most Jews, don't really want to talk about the Shoah and don't want to draw the conclusions that I find inescapable for myself, especially in

relation to what I believe God to be.

How has the Shoah changed your thinking about God?

My training at the seminary did not really constructively deal with the Shoah. I lived in our prayer books, which continuously reflect the ancient way of thinking about God as supreme, all-knowing, all-powerful, the creator and redeemer, a revealer. These are the standard traditional Jewish understandings, and I was raised that way.

I can't really pinpoint anymore when all of this collapsed, but I asked myself at some point, if God is omnipotent and omniscient, how could the Shoah happen? Jewish traditional thinkers had to give the traditional answer, that God is always right and we're always wrong. We are sinners, and so the Shoah was God's judgment, punishment of the Jewish people.

This is still one of the major understandings among many Jews. But I couldn't accept it, because among the victims of the Shoah were a million and a half children under the age of 10, which simply did not jibe with this traditional understanding of how God operates in history.

I was frankly at a loss. Many tried to approach this problem. One of my col-

WHAT ABOUT JESUS?

What are some ways that Jews approach Jesus today?

For Jews Jesus was a Pharisaic rabbi who was treated horrendously, subjected to torture and death. This is something I can deeply empathize with as a Jew.

The transition from Jesus to Christ, that's what I as a Jew—what all Jews—simply can't do. Those who can become Christians.

So the difference is that Christians can believe that God would become human and come into history?

The Incarnation and Resurrection aspect of Christianity is a way of telling the story of God that Jews do not have. That doesn't mean that components of that story are not found in Jewish tradition.

But telling it this way is specific to Christian faith. There is nothing in Judaism that compares to it.

How was Jesus a "Pharisaic" rabbi?

First of all, the Pharisees are sometimes referred to as scribes, and *scribe* is an English word we ought to understand in its Hebrew derivative. It means they are really the experts of the text, not people who write.

The Pharisees are the reason we still read the Bible today. They said that God is in the biblical text; therefore, you've got almost infinite possibilities of interpretation, because God is infinite. In other words, they invented biblical interpretation. Had their opponents, who stuck to the plain reading of Torah, won out, then the Bible would probably by now be full of cobwebs on a shelf in some museum somewhere.

I think the Pharisees were revolutionaries. And to the extent that Jesus is shown teaching divergent ideas, different ways of interpreting the text, that's Pharisaic.

leagues said God had died, and that's why the Shoah was possible. But a Jew can't really say that God dies. I mean if God can die, there is no God.

There were those who said that God is not involved in history, that history is purely a human enterprise. Well if God is not involved in history, who needs him?

Others said God can be absent at a given time, because God can exercise his will as much as humans. That seemed to be a good solution to the question of whether God was at Auschwitz, and I worked with that for a while until all of the sudden it dawned on me: Why would God have become absent at that point? And then the whole thing collapsed, and all I could finally come up with was to say that God *was* at Auschwitz because God is a sufferer.

When I said this to a couple of my friends, they said it sounded Christian. That's right, because the Christians took

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it from us. If you read biblical texts, you find again and again that God suffers. God is not all-powerful or all-knowing. God is depicted as being surprised, as getting angry. You don't get angry if you're all-powerful; you don't have to. You can simply snap your fingers or whatever you do when you're all-powerful.

That might be surprising to both Jews and Christians.

Even though it is a discernible strand, I admit that it has become a minor note in the Jewish symphony. But out of that

comes a very surprising consequence: God is in need of me in a way I never understood before, because if God is suffering, then somebody has to try to make things good for God, and that's my job.

In a curious way, the roles are reversed today. It isn't that I'm asking anything of God; I'm here to give something to God, just as I have to give something to people. It's no longer a question of being a taker; I'm now a giver.

This may also be understood as a question of growing up. In my view the earlier understanding of God is more of a childish understanding. I think it's time to be an adult with God, for God, about God. I understand the covenant as being exactly that, an invitation of mutuality. It's a relationship, not between equals, obviously, but you don't have to be equal to have a relationship. But the relationship from the human being is now in particular to be profoundly supportive and helpful and loving.

As far as I'm concerned, God has done enough. It's now up to us.

What does God need of people?

There is a phrase that comes out of the mystic tradition in Judaism, the Kabala, called *tikkun olam*. It translates into something like "fixing up the world." It proceeds from the assumption that the world is imperfect, even that God intentionally left it imperfect because he had created human beings to become God's agents in making creation proper.

So what does God want? God wants me to work to be part of this effort to fix the world, because either inadvertently or deliberately it is imperfect, which we all know. It is also a very clear directive that Jews should be willing to devote themselves to. But they can't do this alone. It can only be done with others.

To me, out of this challenge of being a fixer-upper, comes the absolute necessity to look for friends, to look for companions, to look for help, so we can do it together. **USC**



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