

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING*Borders and Beyond:
Priests and Laity, Jews and Christians*

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As Pope Benedict has proclaimed 2010 as “the year of the priest,” it is appropriate for both Christians and Jews to reflect on what meaning the priesthood continues to hold for us today. Perhaps no other institution is more dissonant with our contemporary democratic and egalitarian culture than is the priesthood. Does it have any constructive role to play in shaping and influencing modern religious life, not only for priests and the ecclesiastical hierarchies themselves, but also for the faithful laity of each community?

It is also important to probe to what degree the priesthood—which historically functioned as a prime border-constructing institution both intra-religiously (i.e., separating holy priests from laypersons within the same community) and inter-religiously (i.e., separating our community from those outside our faith)¹—has implications for relations between Christians and Jews today and in the future. Do the concepts of priesthood and its call to holiness militate against closer relations between us or can they somehow shed light on our commonalities and interrelated missions?

We should not play the role of revolutionary Greenwich Village theologians. Whatever the answers are to the above questions, they need to emerge from an honest and authentic examination of our respective traditions about priests and the priesthood. This does not preclude us finding fresh and constructive new answers for the future, for a theologically consistent extension of past teachings need not be confined to the ways our forefathers lived these concepts in the empirical past. In this context, I offer a thesis touching on both the formal legal institution as well as the spiritual aspirations of the priesthood in Judaism.

The Jewish Priesthood: Definitions and Preliminaries

Jewish priests—“kohanim” in Hebrew—are central functionaries in the divine services and other tasks mandated in Jewish scriptures, particularly in the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses from Genesis through Deuteronomy. Jews know these sacred books as Torah.² For the most

¹ “Holy nation” implies separation from other communities. The Hebrew term *Qedushah* (holiness) connotes separation by definition.

² Torah means “teaching” in Hebrew. Tragically, it was translated into the Greek as *nomos* and has been often understood pejoratively in Christian tradition as “law.” Yet Jews never understood Torah as solely law, but as a combination of ethics, law and narrative. It is not a dry legal code, but the fount of living waters that has always sustained Judaism and the Jewish people.

part, Jewish scriptures delineate priests as a distinct class of males separate from the rest of the Jewish people, and establishes that priestly status derives from paternal heredity. That is, according to the Bible and Jewish tradition, one is a kohen if—and only if—his father is a kohen.

Priests were common to many ancient Near East cultures and religions, and it is clear that the specific Jewish institution of priesthood had its basis in the practices of non-Jewish cultures of biblical times. For example, Genesis 14:18-20 tells us of Melchizedek, king of Salem, who was a priest. Joseph married the daughter of the Egyptian priest of On (Gn 41:45) and Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was a Midianite priest (Ex 2:16). The biblical establishment of the Jewish priesthood is a prime example of the general methodology of the Torah. It utilizes institutions and practices common to the pagan cultures surrounding the Israelites, but transforms them, striving to purify them of their idolatrous or immoral elements before commanding them to the Israelite nation. Evidently, the God of the Bible was a superb pedagogue. (S)He understood that the historical people of Israel could not radically divorce themselves from all the cultural forms around them and to which they were accustomed. Hence, God mandated a new religion for Israel by using old forms and investing them with different norms and meanings.³

The ancient Egyptian priests often were seen as possessing divine character. They often owned large tracts of Egyptian land, which led to their economic domination over lay Egyptians. They were also in charge of death rituals, embalming and burials—which gave them enormous power leading to all sorts of political and spiritual extortion over lay Egyptians, who, like us were very much concerned with gaining immortality. (How much would you pay someone to guarantee you immortal life?) Jewish priests, too, had a special holiness, but they were never considered anything other than human administrators. And unlike the pagan priests, they were not permitted to own land or have any contact with the dead. Their place was in the Temple, and both cadavers and graves were forbidden from being anywhere within the Temple precincts. Contact with the dead rendered the kohen ritually impure and disqualified him from performing any Temple ritual. One can see evidence of this ancient prohibition in Jerusalem today. The location of the large ancient Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives was chosen because Jews wished to enter the Temple precincts quickly after being resurrected in the messianic era. They were forbidden from being buried in the Temple itself, so the cemetery was placed in the most proximate location—the Mount of Olives. Thus did the Torah succeed in circumscribing the power the kohen had over non-priestly Israelites.

As administrators, Jewish priests are referred to as ministrants of God (Is 61:6; Jer 33:21–22; JI 1:9, 2:17, 13; et al.). More importantly, as Ezekiel 44:16 indicates, their purpose is to draw others nearer to God and to worship of the Holy One. In other words, kohanim are merely conduits or channels that aid the striving of every Jew to reach God.

Who qualifies for the priesthood is a perennial question amongst biblical scholars. Only the male progeny of the first high priest, Aaron, who is descended from the tribal father, Levi? All Levites? Every male Israelite? On this point the biblical laws appear contradictory, but the answer is pregnant with theological and spiritual significance, which I will probe later.

³ Other examples of how the Bible achieved these institutional transformations are: (1) how it largely purged ancient slavery of its inhumane elements, making it in actuality a form of severely circumscribed indentured servitude, (2) how it transformed the pagan practice of animal sacrifices, limiting it to prevent the spread of idolatrous worship in Israel (On this case, see Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:32.), and (3) how it abolished ancient “honor killings” of female relatives suspected of sexual misconduct by establishing a legal procedure for the suspected adulteress (Nm 5:11–31). Providentially, even these ameliorated institutions later disappeared completely from Jewish religious life.

The Functions of Jewish Priests⁴

The priests were mainly concerned with the Temple ritual in Jerusalem, but they were not solely limited to it. In general, we can identify four types of priestly functions: (1) Temple cultic functions, (2) Mantic functions, that is, functions concerned with solving mysteries of the future or the past and making decisions in uncertain cases through revealing the divine will, (3) Treatment of impurities and diseases—such as leprosy—that involved special ceremonies, and (4) Judging, teaching and blessing the people.

1. Temple Cultic Functions. The most prominent function of Jewish biblical priests was to offer sacrifices on the altar that stood in the Temple court. The priests' activities in this ceremony are described in detail at the beginning of the Book of Leviticus and they fall into two major functions: sprinkling sacrificial blood on the altar and burning portions of sacrifices. These functions were normally performed by the ordinary priests. Aaron, the high priest, did not participate in this function except when special sacrifices were brought by all the priests themselves—such as the sacrifices of the eighth day of investiture, described in Leviticus 9; the daily offering sacrificed from the day of consecration (Lv 6:12-15), and the sin offerings whose blood is brought into the inner temple (Lv 4:3–21, 16:3–25). Significantly, the high priest plays the central role in the ritual of the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that occasion, the high priest is the one who administers the sin offerings and who enters the Holy of Holies to ask for atonement for the people of Israel. Atonement comes from God after sincere repentance by the sinners, and the high priest is only what we would call today, a “facilitator.”

A second priestly duty was to sound trumpets on special occasions, such as the pilgrimage festivals and the consecration of the new moon.⁵ The trumpets served as reminders of the sacrifices of Israel before God (Nm 10:10). On the Day of Atonement in the Jubilee Year, it was obligatory to blow a shofar—a trumpet, which was a ram's horn—throughout the land (Lv 25:9), and on the Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, it was obligatory to carry out a “memorial blowing” (Lv 23:24; Nm 29:1). Today, Jews still blow the shofar every year on Rosh Hashanah in every synagogue, but it may be blown by any Jew, not only a kohen.

Another priestly function in this category was carrying the ark that contained the scroll of the Torah when Israel traveled through the desert before entering the land of Canaan, and post-entry before the Temple was built in Jerusalem. Deuteronomy (10:8, 25, 31:9) mentions this as one of the distinguishing features of priesthood. And in all the transportations of the ark during the period of the conquest, scriptures mention that the “priests, sons of Levi,” were its “bearers” (Jos 3:3–17; 4:3, 8:33, 9–10, 16–18).

Other priestly Temple functions included burning the frankincense on the altar (Ex 30:7-9), caring for the lamps (Ex 27:20-21; Lv 24:1-4; Nm 8:1-3), and setting out the showbread on the altar-table (Lv 24:5–9). (If this is reminiscent of church ritual today, it is no coincidence.) The inner system of priestly Temple ceremonies is rooted in the fundamental conception of the Temple as God's dwelling place, in which the Holy One, in some mysterious and metaphorical way, “lives.”

⁴ For a more elaborate description of these four priestly categories, see *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Priests.”

⁵ The Hebrew calendar is a lunar one, and each new moon was celebrated as a quasi-holiday.

2. Mantic Functions. According to Numbers 27:21, in cases of difficult questions or policy such as deciding to embark on an optional war, the high priest was to consult the Urim V'Tumim—the jewel stones located on the breastplate of the high priest (Ex 28:30; Lv 8:8). In order to obtain a reply, the high priest must enter with the Urim V'Tumim "before God," that is, into the sanctum sanctorum, or Qodesh ha-Qedoshim. The use of the Urim V'Tumim was common in the ancient Israelite priesthood, but it seems from Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 that by the Second Temple period, the Urim V'Tumim had been entirely forgotten, and the returnees to Zion in 6th century BCE did not know how to reinstate them. The Urim V'Tumim were consulted when it was necessary to decide between two contradictory possibilities, and a yes or no answer was received. Solution by lots was needed in more complex situations, such as the division of allocated areas of the Promised Land to the tribes of Israel. The most famous decision by lots was the selection of the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement, in which the high priest did the casting (Lv 16:7-10).

Priests would also conduct ordeals to resolve doubtful cases. These ceremonies were held by the priest in the court of the sanctuary. One example is the case of a suspected adulteress as described in Numbers 5:11-31. This practice was also discontinued even before the Temple was destroyed.

3. Treatment of Impurity: Purification and Apotropaic Rites. In the ancient Near East, diseases and plagues were viewed not simply as an organic-physiological phenomena, but embodiments of inner spiritual defects coming to rest in the body. Healing was performed either by waiting until the impurity left the body or by purification rituals to hasten its exit. The Bible instructs that priests are the ones to deal with these impurities or diseases. A prophet could heal leprosy, but only by some miraculous action (Nm 12:13; 2 Kgs 5:1–15; cf. Ex 4:6–8). But the regular and systematic cure was in the hands of the priests. Deuteronomy (24:8 cf. 21:5) admonishes the people to follow carefully the instructions of the priests pertaining to these matters.

This aspect of priestly activity is described in biblical passages dealing with impurities of animals and carcasses (Lv 11), leprosy (Lv 13-14), bodily emissions (Lv 15), and laws concerning impurity of the dead (Nm 19).

4. Judging, Teaching, and Blessing the People. Kohanim also judged. Although this was generally a function of the elders and heads of families, in some towns, priests would participate in judging together with the elders. If a difficult case required higher expertise, Deuteronomy (17:8–13) enjoins the litigants to go up to the chosen city (i.e., Jerusalem) and be judged there, although the assumption is that judging there is in the hands of both the priests and the judges (Dt 17:9, 19:17).

Deuteronomy 21:5 requires that "every law suit" be decided by the priests, but this seems to be only a generalized mode of speech. Apparently the description contained in Deuteronomy essentially reflects actual historical reality according to which the priests participated in judicial authority. As a piece of history, I Samuel 4:18 tells us that Eli the priest achieved the status of a great judge of Israel. Ezekiel says of the priests that "in controversy they shall act as judges" (Ez 44:24).

Importantly, the priests also served as teachers of Torah to the people. This function is mentioned as early as the blessing of Moses found in Deuteronomy 33:10: "They shall teach Jacob thy ordinances, and Israel thy Torah. They shall put incense before thy nostrils, and whole burnt-offering upon thy altar."

Individual priests rotated their service time in the Temple, with each deployment lasting only three months of the calendar year. The Talmud contends that in the other nine months of the year, the kohanim taught Torah to the people. Sometimes the priests' teaching did not exist as a special institution, but was a by-product of their other activities. Thus, Torah followed from the legal and moral discussions held before the priests (Dt 17:11, 33:10). Torah was also taught by way of guidance given by the priests to the people in matters of impurities and diseases (Dt 24:8; Hg 2:11ff.). Indeed, the various types of laws of impurity themselves were called "torah" (Lv 11:46, 13:59, et al.) and were to be learned by the public (Lv 10:10–1). Related to this teaching function, the priests were entrusted with preserving the scrolls of the Torah.

The final—and for our purposes most significant—function of the kohanim was offering blessings to the people. The mandate to bless the people occurs on different occasions and in a number of places in the Bible (Lv 9:22; Dt 27:12–26; Jos 8:33–34), but most prominently in the imperative found in Numbers 6:24–26. Says the Lord:

Thus you shall bless the children of Israel:
 "May the Lord bless you and keep you;
 May the Lord cause His face to shine on you and be gracious to you;
 May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and grant you peace."
 So they are to invoke My name upon the Israelites, and I will bless them.

This blessing was recited every morning in the Temple. It is important to stress that the text of this blessing clearly indicates that blessing comes through the priest, not from the priest. It is God—and God alone—who is the source of all blessing. The priest is merely a conduit of that divine gift that God bestows upon his children.

The Priesthood after the Destruction of the Temple

When the Romans destroyed the second Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, of course the Temple sacrifices and purity/impurity rituals were discontinued. As a result, the cultic, mantic and purity/impurity functions of the kohanim also came to an end. Concurrent with this was a democratization process throughout Jewish religious life. The Pharisees and their tradition, from which Jesus emerged and which later became normative rabbinic Judaism, de-emphasized hereditary privilege in Jewish society. Merit—particularly that of Torah scholarship—eclipsed authority derived from pedigree. The famous Pharisaic statement, "A learned bastard takes priority over the ignorant high priest" (Mamzer talmid hakham kodem l'kohen gadol am ha'arets)⁶ became the religious and social organizational principle after the Temple was destroyed. Moreover, the primary teaching function in Israel was transferred to the Pharisaic rabbis.

However, a few priestly functions—as opposed to enduring priestly restrictions and privileges—did continue and persist until today. The most prominent is the act of contemporary kohanim blessing the people of Israel.⁷ Today in the Diaspora, during every major holiday the kohanim of each Jewish community rise, cover themselves with their prayer shawls, spread out their arms and fingers in a special configuration, and bless the community with the beautiful blessing from Numbers 6. Again:

⁶ Mishnah Horayot, 3:8.

⁷ A second enduring priestly function is the redemption of first born Jewish males, in accordance with Numbers 3:45, Numbers 8:17, and Numbers 18:16. See also Luke 2:22-24.

May the Lord bless you and keep you;
May the Lord cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and grant you peace.

In response to each part of the threefold blessing, the community responds “May it be Thy will.” In the land of Israel, the kohanim perform this function each and every Sabbath in addition to the holidays. And in Jerusalem, the holiest of Jewish places, the priests recite it every day at the end of the morning service.

It is precisely this practice of priestly blessing that provides a key to the essence of the eternal importance of the priesthood. Indeed, I believe that it illuminates the divine mission of all Israel—and perhaps even Christianity—in sacred history. I would like to explore this with you for the remainder of this proceeding.

The Priestly Blessing Today

I mentioned earlier that there is a question about who the Bible regards as fit for priestly function: Only the particular subset of the Jewish people who are sons of Aaron from the tribe of Levi and their descendants, or every Israelite? The most important place where the Bible implies that all of Israel should function as priests is Exodus 19:5-6. Immediately before revelation at Sinai, God and the Jewish people commit themselves to be partners in the Mosaic covenant. God proclaims:

If you will faithfully obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all people. All the earth is Mine, but you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The implication of this idea is revolutionary. If the function of a priest is to bestow God’s blessings upon others, and all Israel is to be a “kingdom of priests,” then it can only be the gentile nations of the world who Israel is called upon to bless. Hence some traditional Jewish theologians like Rabbis Obadiah ben Jacob Seforno⁸ and Samson Raphael Hirsch⁹ identified this Sinaitic priestly calling as the mandate to spread blessing by teaching the world about God and divine moral values. Indeed, this universal calling is the meaning of Jewish election at Sinai, the very reason for Israel’s covenant and religious existence. One early 20th century rabbinic authority, Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, went so far as to claim that in establishing the covenant with Israel at Sinai, God completed His plan for all of creation that began in Genesis.¹⁰ Election of Israel is the culmination of creation, not because Jews are the center of the universe, but because Sinai charged the Jewish people to be teachers of all humanity, instructing all people of God’s authority over creation and His moral rules for human social order. In other words, Israel was created for the world, not the world for Israel.

The prophet Isaiah poetically expresses in God’s name this same universal calling of Israel:

⁸ 15th-16th Italy; his commentary ad loc.

⁹ 18th century Germany; his commentary ad loc.

¹⁰ His commentary on the Pentateuch, *Ha-Ameq Davar*, Introduction to the Book of Exodus.

I will establish you as a covenant of the people, for a Light of the Nations...Behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and a thick darkness the nations. But God will shine upon you. Nations shall then go by your light and kings by your illumination (42:6, 60:2-3).

The Jewish “nation of priests” will illuminate the world.

The nexus of priesthood and universal blessing cogently explains the spiritual connection between Abraham, who is understood by Jewish tradition as the first Jew and who the rabbis identified as a type of priest,¹¹ with his later descendants who became obligated in the Mosaic commandments after revelation at Sinai. God’s original charge to Abraham in Genesis 12:2-3 was to “be a blessing, and through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”

What is the content of this blessing, of this light? Jewish theological tradition understood Abraham to have assumed the responsibility to be the witness to God’s presence in Heaven and on Earth,¹² and, as indicated in Genesis 18:19: “to teach the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice” (*tsedakah u-mishpat*). That is, Abraham, his immediate family and his descendants for eternity—the Jewish people—are tasked with the mission of bringing God’s blessing to all of humanity and the divine light of the fundamental moral values of righteousness and justice to every corner of creation.

Drawing on this Jewish concept, the Catholic Church likewise considers herself to have assumed this collective priestly function. This is clear in the first letter of Peter (I Pt 2:9), who stated that the whole church is “a chosen race, a royal priesthood.” This idea was reiterated in the Second Vatican Council’s document, *Lumen Gentium* (Light of the Nations): “The baptized, by regeneration and anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood.”¹³

Can Judaism possibly agree to this claim of priesthood by the Church? Does it not inevitably require conceding that the Jewish people have been superseded by the Church as God’s chosen people? Does it also not entail dropping the fervent Jewish conviction that the Jewish people are still in living covenant with the Creator of Heaven and Earth? I believe that Judaism can—and should-agree to this claim of the Church, even while Jews must insist that, qua Jews, they remain in living covenant with God.

It is noteworthy that a number of rabbinical authorities and Jewish thinkers in the modern era—all quite “Orthodox,” I may add—have described the historical influence and mission of Christianity as identical to the original mission of Abraham, namely bringing the presence of God and His transcendent morality to the world. Here are two examples:

¹¹ *Midrash Aggadah* (Buber ed.) on Gn 12:3.

¹² The early rabbinic interpretation (*Midrash, Sifre, Ha’azinu* 313) states that “before Abraham, God was called ‘God of the heavens’; after Abraham, people called Him ‘God of the heavens and the earth.’” That is, Abraham taught people that God was present in human affairs. The rabbis derived the *midrash* from the text of Gn 24:2-3, in which Abraham requires that his gentile servant, Eliezer, swear “by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth.” Since Christianity adopted this idea of religious purpose and popularized the term “witness,” Jews have shied away from using it. However, neither God nor Isaiah hesitated to do so in reference to the Jewish people and their mission. Through Isaiah, God calls Israel “My witnesses” (Is 43:11-12).

¹³ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, November 21, 1964, Chapter II, section 10 found at http://www.scborromeo.org/docs/lumen_gentium.pdf.

Rabbi Jacob Emden in 18th century Germany stated:

Christians removed idols (from the nations) and obligated them in the seven moral commandments of Noah so that they would not behave like animals of the field. Christians instilled firmly the nations with moral traits...The goal of Christians [and Moslems] is to promote Godliness among the nations...to make known that there is a Ruler in Heaven and Earth.¹⁴

And Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in 19th century Germany proclaimed:

The peoples in whose midst the Jews are now living [i.e., Christians] have accepted the Jewish Bible of the Old Testament as a book of Divine revelation. They profess their belief in the God of heaven and earth as proclaimed in the Bible and they acknowledge the sovereignty of Divine Providence...Judaism produced an offshoot [Christianity]...in order to bring to the world—sunk in idol worship, violence, immorality and the degradation of man—at least the tidings of the One Alone.¹⁵

Where would the world be without Christianity and its vast influence? Still steeped in rank idolatry and pagan immorality, according to these rabbinic leaders. In effect, these rabbis saw Christianity as playing a role in the covenantal calling that God made to Abraham, that he function as a priest and bring blessing to all the nations of the earth: “Through you all of the nations of the earth shall be blessed!” (Gn 12:3).

If this is so, Jews can view Christians as partners in conveying the priestly blessing of divinity and morality to the world. In this conception, Christians and Jews would co-exist as two independent “nations of priests,” each working differently toward the same end of God’s plan for sacred history. This is a new claim for Jewish theology and a relatively new claim for Christian theology, which until recently had always insisted that the Church had superseded and completely replaced the Jewish people as the people of God.

Jews and Christians: Priests to the World

If we are true to the Bible’s account of Abraham and God’s challenge to him, we must admit that the Bible does not portray Abraham as a theologian.¹⁶ It describes Abraham as a man of faith, of action and of morality. His calling as priest, therefore, should above all denote a commitment to practical action in sacred human history. And it is precisely today that the practical teachings of Abraham and our priestly calling to the world are particularly urgent.

At the dawn of the 21st century, human beings face awesome and terrifying possibilities. We have the tools to improve and protect human life as never before—and we have the means to destroy all human life and God’s creation. Civilization as we know it stands on the edge of a precipice. Our values, choices and behavior will spell the difference between a future of blessing

¹⁴ *Seder Olam Rabbah* 35-37; *Sefer ha-Shimush* 15-17.

¹⁵ *Nineteen Letters on Judaism*, edited and annotated by Joseph Elias (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1995). It is because Hirsch believed that the fulfillment of God’s covenant as spreading the reality of God throughout the world constituted the *telos* of sacred history that he could claim that Christianity [and Islam] “represented a major step in bringing the world closer to the goal of all history.” See his commentary on Ex 19:6.

¹⁶ In a remarkable transvaluation of the biblical text, Maimonides sees Abraham primarily as a theologian and rational philosopher, ala Socrates. See his *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1:1-3.

and a hellish future in which the world descends into its primordial chaos. After witnessing the Nazi Holocaust, the genocides and democides of the past century, any naiveté or complacency on our part are religious sins. The horrors of the 20th century have taught us that radical evil was real then, and it remains an ever-present potentiality for today and the future. As partners exercising priestly function, the ethical imperative “to do the right and the good,” must be foremost in our behavior and theology. We must understand deeply that there is no justification for any teleological suspension of the ethical—whether the telos is theological, political, financial or personal. The moral imperative, as both the Bible and Kant insisted¹⁷, must be categorical.

A number of troubling signs powerfully dominate our cultural and political landscapes. Post-modern secularism has created a pervasive value-orientation whose foundations contain the seeds from which destructive forces can again grow. Hedonism drives much of contemporary life and ethos. Violence saturates our media and popular culture, sometimes appearing as merely another justified form of pleasure. This contributes to the evisceration of moral concern and the numbing of individual conscience, both of which are essential to human flourishing and individual dignity.

Moral utilitarianism has also made a comeback in contemporary academia and high culture. In this ethic, human life possesses no intrinsic value. Individual human life too often becomes a commodity to be traded—and sometimes even discarded. This moral philosophy shares the Nazi denial of the fundamental axiom of Judeo-Christian ethics, namely that all persons are created in *Imago Dei*, God's Image, and hence that each person's life has non-quantifiable sacred value.

Because relativism has become one of the most accepted moral theories in our time, objectivity and moral absolutes are under ferocious attack. The belief that there is no objective bar by which to measure human actions easily slips into the belief that there is no bar at all for valid moral judgment. And from there, it is but a small step to the denial of ethics entirely. In the political theater, a radical and intolerant Islamist monism has grown into a common threat to Judaism and Christianity and to moderate Muslims around the world as well. It denies Jewish and Christian legitimacy in the Middle East and by implication tolerance of all religious diversity.

Finally, irrational religious extremism has become a potent force in both world politics and religious identity. Although the 21st century is but in its infancy, we have already seen too much violence and mass slaughter committed in the name of God. All these phenomena are frightening dangers and call Jews and Christians to joint action.

Today, Jews and Christians play an essential role in sacred God's plan for human progress in history—indeed for the survival of humanity. We do this together by being nations of priests and bearing public witness to God and his values. As partners in Abraham's priestly mission, we are spiritually obligated to heed the divine call of bringing blessing to the world and to be charismatic peoples, message bearing peoples.

Here is how I see our common testimony:

1. There is a spiritual center to the universe because the world was created by a loving God, who is intimately involved in human lives and who yearns to redeem His children. Jews and Christians should be unembarrassed about teaching this reality, as was Abraham when he taught his peers about “the God of Heaven and Earth.”

¹⁷ *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

2. As the Creator of all, God is the transcendent authority over human life, and he establishes the validity of moral values. Although sometimes difficult to apply, moral values are neither relative nor human conventions, but intrinsic parts of the universe that are essential for human flourishing. The fundamental moral values of righteousness and justice must remain primary to all human endeavors.

3. All persons are created in *Imago Dei*, the Image of God, and every human being has intrinsic sanctity that derives from this transcendent quality. Therefore all persons possess inherent dignity and must be treated as such. Moreover, the spiritual essence of each person ensures that individual human life is not a process of biological decay toward death but a journey of spiritual growth toward life. Because human life has this transcendent character, human worth cannot be measured solely in utilitarian, social or materialistic terms. And because every person is created in the Divine Image, any assault on innocent human life is an assault on God that diminishes the Divine Presence in our world.

4. Abraham learned from his trial of the binding of Isaac that God loves human life and abhors death. Thus, Abraham's covenantal children must teach that killing innocent persons in the name of God is contrary to the God of our scriptures, and all forms of religious violence are idolatries that the world must reject.

5. As Abraham defended justice and righteousness before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, his children are duty bound to teach social justice and display individual righteousness. It was only Abraham's moral protest to God and concern for the moral treatment of others that distinguished his righteousness from Noah's self-righteousness, and that earned him the privilege to be the father of God's covenantal people. Our commitment to justice and righteousness for all human creatures is the test of our fidelity to our priestly calling that is designed to bring peace and harmony to the world.

6. Lastly, as faithful Christians and Jews believing in messianic history, we must teach the eternal possibility of human progress and moral reform. We cannot fall prey to pessimism, nihilism or a Malthusian acceptance of war, disease and oppression as permanent features of human destiny.¹⁸ Hope in possibility of a peaceful humanity is the meaning of our messianic belief.

Critical theological differences remain—and should always remain—between Judaism and Christianity. Yet both of our faiths demand belief in messianic history and action to make our world a place where God can enter. We share the priestly task to bless the world, to make it a better place, where moral values are real, where human affairs reflect a spiritual center, and where every human life is endowed with meaning.

The prophet Micah offers a stunning description of that time when history culminates in the blessings of the messianic era:

Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and the God of Jacob, that He teach us His ways, and we will walk in His paths....Let all the peoples beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war anymore. Let every man sit under his vine and under his fig tree;

¹⁸ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Norton & Company, 2003).

and no one shall make him afraid....Let all the people walk, each in the name of his God; and we shall walk in the name of our Lord our God forever and ever (4:2-5).

If Jews and Christians work together in this priestly calling and become partners after nearly 2,000 years of theological delegitimization and physical conflict, then peace and harmony is possible between any two peoples anywhere on earth. That peace would be our most powerful witness to God's presence in history and to the fulfillment of our calling to carry God's blessing to the world. Indeed, this holy partnership is the very stuff of which the messianic dream is made.