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“The Best Pope the Jews Ever Had”: Jewish Reactions to the Death of Pope John Paul II

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When, on April 13, 1986, Pope John Paul II made his historic first visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome, he was famously welcomed by its venerable Chief Rabbi, Dr. Elio Toaff, a man who had already been serving in that capacity for thirty-five years. The history of Rome's ancient Jewish community has been closely intertwined with that of the papacy almost from the start, and Toaff had himself been witness to—and a significant protagonist in—some of the most remarkable decades of that history. Indeed, several historians record that in June of 1963, Toaff had led a small delegation of congregants from the Great Synagogue to St. Peter's Square, where they had joined the tens of thousands gathered there, praying for the much-loved Pope John XXIII on the night before he died.¹ At the time of his death, John XXIII was hailed as “the best Pope the Jews had ever had,”² and there is no question that, in 1963, he was justly deserving of that title. As Pinchas Lapide reports:

“His constant efforts to eradicate hatred will forever be inscribed in the memory of our people,” said President

¹ Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi, *His Holiness: John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 649; Darcy O'Brien, *The Hidden Pope: The Untold Story of a Lifelong Friendship That Is Changing the Relationship Between Catholics and Jews: The Personal Journey of John Paul II and Jerzy Kluger* (New York: Daybreak Books, 1998), 24.

John Paul himself alluded to that event in his address at Rome's Great Synagogue: “I am ... well aware that the Chief Rabbi, on the night before the death of Pope John, did not hesitate to go to Saint Peter's Square; and accompanied by members of the Jewish faithful, he mingled with the crowd of Catholics and other Christians, in order to pray and keep vigil, as it were bearing witness, in a silent but very effective way, to the greatness of soul of that Pontiff, who was open to all people without distinction, and in particular to the Jewish brethren.” (“Address at the Great Synagogue of Rome,” April 13, 1986, *Dialogika*, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/305-1p2-86apr13>).

² Judith Herschcopf Banki and Eugene J. Fisher, eds. *A Prophet for Our Time: An Anthology of the Writings of Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 25.

Shazar of Israel. Chief Rabbi Nissim deplored his death as “a bitter blow not only to the whole of Christendom, but also to lovers of peace throughout the world.” And the Minister of Religious Affairs, Dr. Z. Wahrhaftig, eulogized Pope John as “one of the truly righteous men of the world, whose loving spirit and respect for mankind extended to the Jewish people as well.” A few days later in Jerusalem, priests, pastors, rabbis, nuns, monks and teachers of eleven different creeds united in paying heartfelt tribute to an indefatigable seeker after truth and justice.³

Forty-two years later, in April 2005, it was John's successor, John Paul II, who lay dying in the Apostolic Palace. And once again, in a remarkable display of tenderness, loyalty and friendship, members of Rome's Jewish community came to offer their prayers for the health of a man who, over the course of nearly twenty-seven years of papal leadership, had transformed the Jewish-Catholic relationship in ways that John XXIII could only have imagined.⁴ This time, the Roman Jewish delegation was led by Toaff's successor, Rabbi Dr. Riccardo Di Segni,⁵ who said that he had come “to pray here in the piazza as a sign of sharing in the grief of our brothers for their concerns, and as

³ Pinchas E. Lapide, *The Last Three Popes and the Jews* (London: Souvenir Press, 1967), 344.

⁴ It was not merely Roman Jews, however, who offered their prayers for the Pope's recovery. As Lisa Palmieri-Billig reported in the *Jerusalem Post*, “Approximately 30 rabbinical members of the World Union of Progressive Judaism led by Rabbis Mark Winer and Uri Regev gathered at the hospital's entrance to pray for him.” (“The *Tikkun Olam* Pope,” *Jerusalem Post* [April 3, 2005], 1, LexisNexis Academic, web, accessed February 15, 2013).

⁵ “Chiesa: Il mondo prega per il Pontefice morente,” *RAI News* (April 4, 2005), accessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.rainews24.it/it/news.php?newsid=53457>. Explaining his choice of prayers, during a press conference called at the synagogue just before Shabbat, Di Segni said, “psalms belong to both of our traditions and are a very strong expression of prayer. Let's hope the pope's strong fiber will help him overcome even this crisis.” (Palmieri-Billig, “*Tikkun Olam* Pope.”).

a sign of warmth for this pope and for all that he has done.”⁶ It was no coincidence that the epithet once conferred on John XXIII—“the best Pope the Jews had ever had”—was now being widely applied to John Paul II by Jewish leaders and media commentators.

Nearly eight years after the death of Pope John Paul, on April 2, 2005, it is both nostalgic and instructive to re-read some of the many comments that were spoken and published in the hours and days after his passing, both by Israeli leaders, and by Jewish sources worldwide, and to reflect on what they say about his truly historic impact on the Jewish-Catholic relationship. In this article, I will examine a broad (but, I believe, representative) cross-section of the post-mortem Jewish reactions to John Paul, highlighting some of their key messages about who Pope John Paul was, what he did, and how his pontificate had been viewed by Jewish leaders and spokespersons on the international and local levels. Because of the complexity of this pope and of the Jewish community itself, it would be reductive to do anything but convey the broad range of opinions expressed in the Jewish community about the strengths and weaknesses of the deceased pontiff. Through the collage of materials presented, this article therefore primarily presents a portrait of this historical moment.

One of the first Jewish voices to offer a tribute to the late Pope was Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism. Yoffie referred to Pope Wojtyla as “a treasured friend” of the Jewish community, and enumerated the milestone accomplishments of his papacy: his ground-breaking 1986 visit to the Rome synagogue, his repeated denunciations of antisemitism, his affirmation of the continuing validity of God’s covenant with the Jews, and his placing of the *Shoah* at

the center of contemporary Catholic reflection on Judaism. It was under John Paul, Yoffie recalled, that diplomatic relations had been established at last between Israel and the Holy See in December 1993, and John Paul’s Jubilee pilgrimage to the Holy Land had been both a spiritual and political coup. He continued:

The Jewish community also admired his leadership in advancing democracy in Eastern Europe, his clarion call for caring for the world’s neediest, and his resolute opposition to the death penalty. While we had our disagreements—on gender equality, reproductive rights, and the rights of gays and lesbians—we never doubted for a moment that he was a man of profound principle, courage, and vision. Even when our religious traditions led us to different conclusions, John Paul II always found new opportunities for reengaging in our common purpose of bringing justice with mercy into the human community.

In the Jewish tradition, we say of those who have left us: “May his memory be a blessing.” We say this today of John Paul II, knowing that his memory is and will continue to be a blessing for countless millions throughout the world, and that the Jewish community joins his flock in grieving for this courageous shepherd.⁷

Yoffie’s words—generous but also realistic—stood at the beginning of a flood of condolences and words of praise from Jewish leaders.

In its statement, the Anti-Defamation League honoured the deceased pontiff for his “compassion, leadership and

⁶ “World Prays for Pope’s Recovery,” *The Guardian*, (April 1, 2005), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/apr/01/catholicism.religion2>, accessed February 15, 2013.

⁷ “The Jewish Community Has Lost a Treasured Friend”, Union for Reform Judaism, <http://urj.org/about/union/pr/2005/pope/>, accessed February 6, 2013.

understanding”; it pointed out that John Paul’s commitment to Jewish people dated back many decades, to his years as a young man—and later a young priest—in Poland. After offering a similar litany of the Pope’s significant statements and actions, ADL Executive Director Abraham Foxman said:

Most importantly, the Pope rejected the destructive concept of supersessionism and has recognized the special relationship between Christianity and the Jewish people, while sharing his understanding of Judaism as a living heritage, of the permanent validity of God’s covenant with the Jewish people. He was a man of God in every sense and a true friend whose visionary leadership will be sorely missed.⁸

The ADL certainly had, at times, raised sharp questions about John Paul’s actions and decisions, but in death, there was simply a respectful acknowledgement of the many significant accomplishments that had made up the lengthy and momentous pontificate just ended.

Rabbi David Rosen, the AJC’s Director of Interreligious Affairs, and a man whose interreligious work on an international level had frequently brought him into contact and conversation with Pope John Paul, wrote in *HaAretz* of how the late pope—a former actor—had used the power of gestures and actions to communicate a message that went beyond merely words. “The scene of John Paul embracing the chief rabbi of Rome, Elio

⁸ “ADL Mourns the Loss of Pope John Paul II,” Anti-Defamation League, http://archive.adl.org/PresRele/VaticanJewish_96/4679_96, accessed February 6, 2013. In a particularly poignant personal footnote, the ADL communiqué noted that Foxman had himself been saved from death by a Polish Catholic nanny, who had him baptized and raised him as a Catholic until he was returned to his family after the war. See: Barbara Demmick, “Holocaust survivor credits John Paul: ‘He saved me’,” *San Jose Mercury News*, March 24, 2000, 14a, Lexis Nexis Academic, web, accessed February 13, 2013.

Toaff, reached millions of believers who did not choose to or who could not read his writings.” In addition, the Pope’s visit to Israel in the year 2000 had exercised a powerful effect on many Israelis, for whom Catholicism was largely an unknown. Rosen continued:

[It] opened the eyes of Israelis to a new reality. Not only was the Church no longer an enemy, its head was a true friend! To see the Pope at Yad Vashem, demonstrating solidarity, weeping at the suffering of the Jewish people, to learn that he had helped save Jews during the Holocaust and that subsequently, as a priest, he had returned Jewish children adopted by Christians to their Jewish families, to see the head of the Catholic Church placing a prayer of atonement for the sins of Christians against Jews between the stones of the Western Wall—all of these scenes had a profound effect on many Israelis...⁹

and, Rosen correctly pointed out, many Christians as well. “No pope has devoted himself as much to advancing positive relations between the Christian world and the Jewish people as this pope,” Rosen said elsewhere.¹⁰ John Paul had been “the true hero of Christian-Jewish reconciliation,” even if some of his judgements and words had at times provoked consternation, tension and pain on the part of his Jewish interlocutors.¹¹

⁹ David Rosen, “The Real Hero in Reconciling Christians and Jews,” *HaAretz* (April 3, 2005), <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/the-real-hero-in-reconciling-christians-and-jews-1.154862>, accessed February 13, 2013.

¹⁰ Sam Ser, “What Will Follow the ‘Best Pope the Jews Ever Had’? Beatification of Pius XII, Non-European Successor Could Seriously Strain Jewish-Catholic Relations,” *Jerusalem Post* (April 4, 2005), 3, Lexis Nexis Academic, web, accessed February 15, 2013.

¹¹ Rosen, “The Real Hero...”

Writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, journalist Lisa Palmieri-Billig spoke of the way in which the historical context of John Paul's upbringing instilled in him a particular sensitivity to indignities committed against any human beings, and against Jews in particular:

Born with a talent for communication, an overpowering sensitivity and empathy for the human condition, steeped in a deeply religious Polish Catholic environment but surrounded by Jewish friends and classmates, he consequently embraced the moral imperative of transforming consciences according to his faith...A vision of human dignity and respect for the sanctity of life based on the biblical statement that humankind was created in the image of its creator made John Paul II not only a wielder of religious and political transformations, but also a man of dialogue with Judaism first, and secondly with other world religions.

And yet there was no skirting the fact of the problematic aspects of Catholic-Jewish relations, both those which resulted from the Pope's personal decisions, and those over which he merely presided as the Church's leader. She continued:

...[H]is theological positions have sometimes clashed with Jewish sensitivities (such as his reference to Auschwitz as a "Golgotha" of the Jews, implying that Jews were sacrificial victims of salvation rather than simply victims of evil) ...It was his respect for Jewish sensitivity that led him in 1989 to intervene with a personal request to the Carmelite nuns in Auschwitz to transfer their convent out of the Nazi concentration camp. He himself had helped set up the foundation, The Church that Suffers, which helped finance the building of the convent, but when he understood the Jewish perception that the nuns' presence there, as well as a

huge, neighboring cross, was "Christianizing" the memory of a genocide whose Jewish victims comprise approximately 90 percent of the total, he took the unprecedented measure...¹²

At a prayer-gathering in the hours before John Paul's death, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the Chief Rabbi of John Paul's native Poland, had highlighted the unique affection Poland—and its Jewish community—felt for the first son of Poland to sit on the chair of St. Peter, stating:

We Jews feel a special attachment to Pope John Paul II because of everything he has done for us. Through his teachings he created that space in the life of Poland today in which Polish Jews can try to live in Poland again ...Pope John Paul II has changed the soul and spirit of the church so much that we have no choice but to continue his work.¹³

In addition to his specifically *religious* efforts, John Paul's acknowledged *political* influence (especially in the fall of Polish Communism) had contributed to a Poland in which Jewish life could be lived more freely and easily.

The tributes were truly international. France's Chief Rabbi, Joseph Sitruk, issued a statement of condolence to the world's Catholics on the loss of their chief shepherd which read:

The pontificate of John Paul II was particularly dense, so it is very difficult to highlight just a few key moments ...In his relations with the Jewish people, he crafted a

¹² Palmieri-Billig, "Tikkun Olam Pope."

¹³ Meron Rappaport, Jack Khoury and News Services, "Pope John Paul II Dies at the Age of 84," in *HaAretz* (March 31, 2005), <http://www.haaretz.com/news/pope-john-paul-ii-dies-at-the-age-of-84-1.154670>, accessed February 15, 2013.

true fraternal dialogue. He initiated a very courageous call for repentance, acknowledging the Church's responsibility in anti-Semitism...His death leaves such a great emptiness. But did not the Prophets say that "the memory of the Righteous is a blessing"? Amen.¹⁴

From Argentina came similar words of warmth and appreciation from a number of rabbis. Rabbi Angel Kreiman said that John Paul had been "the best friend the Jews have had since Alexander the Great...He especially valued the Jewish people and the State of Israel." Rabbi Daniel Goldman noted that many people still do not realize how much has changed, and others may still consider it inadequate. Nonetheless, it was undeniable that "there have been tremendous strides in the relationship between the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the Jewish people." Furthermore, Goldman said that, by John Paul's statements regarding the *Shoah* and antisemitism, and by his comments favorable to the state of Israel, the Pope had allowed bridges to be built much more quickly between Jews and Catholics. Rabbi Adrian Herbst spoke of the Pope's magisterium as establishing a clear-cut threshold in religious history. He said, "There will be a 'before' and 'after' in history, thanks to John Paul II...He speeded up a Church that had been frozen in the Middle Ages, turned it around and led it into the modern age."¹⁵

What was perhaps most striking and unprecedented about the reaction to the Pope's death, however, were the eloquent and numerous voices emanating from the State of

Israel—religious and political figures who were able to speak about the late Pope with a degree of personal familiarity, something never possible with his predecessors. This was a Pope who had met with numerous Israeli delegations, and whose Great Jubilee journey to Israel was so markedly different from the brief, politically abstract and diplomatically tense visit of Paul VI in 1964. From across the spectrum of Jewish movements and Israeli political parties, there was a palpable sense of loss that would normally have seemed strange coming from Jews, but that demonstrated the imprint of John Paul's presence and gestures on the peoples of the Jewish state.

Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Silvan Shalom, spoke of the Pope's death as a loss, not just for Catholics or Christians, but for humanity as a whole, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' communiqué spoke of the Pope's efforts at bringing about greater historical consciousness of past injustices and of his committing his flock to a path of *teshuvah* (repentance). It stated:

In the build-up to the millennium, Pope John Paul II called on the Catholic Church to conduct soul-searching regarding its relations with the Jewish people and all those who have suffered as a result of the Church's teachings. Prior to his historic visit to Israel in 2000, the Pope asked the Jewish people for forgiveness for the crimes that have been perpetrated against it in the name of the Church.¹⁶ He later wrote that message on a piece of paper which he placed between the rocks of

¹⁴ "Message du GRF à l'occasion du décès du Pape Jean-Paul II" (April 6, 2005), http://www.col.fr/article.php3?id_article=748, accessed February 17, 2013, (my translation from the French original).

¹⁵ "El Santo Padre es el 'mejor amigo' del pueblo judío," *Infobae* (April 2, 2005), <http://www.infobae.com/notas/nota.php?idx=175484&idxSeccion=100439>, accessed February 13, 2013 (my translation).

¹⁶ In fact, the Pope did not specifically ask *Jews* for their forgiveness on this occasion, but prayed for *God's* forgiveness for sins committed by Christians *against Jews*. An English translation of the Pope's prayer for forgiveness (which he later inserted between the stones of the Western Wall) is available online at *Dialogika*: <http://www.ccr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/338-jp2-00mar26>.

the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site, during his visit to Jerusalem.¹⁷

That moment, deeply imprinted in the memory of many Jews and Christians, had—even in those five years—become an icon for the positive kinds of changes for which John Paul had been a catalyst.¹⁸ In its concluding words, the Foreign Minister's statement said, "Israel, the Jewish people and the entire world, lost today a great champion of reconciliation and brotherhood between the faiths."¹⁹

One of the major achievements of John Paul's papacy had been the establishment of an official committee for dialogue between the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See.²⁰ John Paul had met with both of Israel's Chief Rabbis, Yona Metzger and Shlomo Amar, and had visited their predecessors at the Chief Rabbinate's headquarters, *Hekhhal Sholomo*, on March 23, 2000, as part of his Jubilee pilgrimage.

¹⁷ "Statement on the death of Pope John Paul II," *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (April 2, 2005) <http://www.mfa.gov.il/PopeinIsrael/Israel-Vatican/Statement+on+the+Passing+of+Pope+John+Paul+II+2-Apr-2005.htm>, accessed February 15, 2013.

¹⁸ The Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Dr. Jonathan Sacks, said, "That one act of atonement for the suffering caused to Jews by the Church was one of the great healing moments of our time." See: "Pope John Paul II 1920-2005: World Hails a Leader Who Inspired Faith and Hope: The Last 24 Hours," *The Observer* (April 3, 2005), 2, Lexis Nexis Academic, web, accessed February 15, 2013.

¹⁹ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Statement..."

²⁰ For David Rosen's discussion of the significance of this Orthodox Jewish involvement, see "*Nostra Aetate*," Forty Years After Vatican II: Present & Future Perspectives," *The Holy See* (October 27, 2005), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20051027_rabbi-rosen_en.html, accessed February 15, 2013. He notes that "this bilateral commission [for dialogue between the Vatican and the Chief Rabbinate] is nothing less than a historic achievement that also represents the remarkable fruit of *Nostra Aetate* and Pope John Paul II's personal commitment and contribution to its fulfillment."

After his death, their spokesman noted that both of the Chief Rabbis had met the pope and appreciated his love for the Jewish people. "The pope, who declared Judaism's senior position among the world's religions, and who decried anti-Semitism and terrorism, was a committed champion of peace and justice. Our hope is that his successor will continue his legacy, struggle for peace and freedom, fight antisemitism and terrorism and deepen the Christian world's awareness that the Jewish people are the forerunners of monotheistic religions."²¹ The unfortunate fact that preparations for Passover coincided with the Pope's funeral, however, necessarily prevented them from travelling to Rome to take part in those ceremonies. As the *Jerusalem Post* reported:

"Pessah is just a few weeks away and the rabbi [Rabbi Shlomo Amar] has a lot of work to do," said an Amar aide. "There is the whole kashrut apparatus to oversee, the sale of hametz, not to mention the rabbi's duties as head of the rabbinic court system." Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger will also not make it to the Vatican. "The rabbi cannot go because it entails being there for Shabbat," said an aide. "He has previous engagements and, therefore, cannot be outside Israel for Shabbat." Instead, Oded Weiner, director-general of the Chief Rabbinate, who is not a rabbi, will take part in the funeral, as will Haifa Chief Rabbi She'ar-Yashuv Cohen.²²

²¹ Mati Wagner, "Chief Rabbis Won't Attend Pope's Funeral, But Katsav Will," *Jerusalem Post* (April 8, 2005), 3, Lexis Nexis Academic, web, accessed February 15, 2013.

²² Wagner, "Chief Rabbis..." Several news stories highlighted the unprecedented number of non-Christian representatives who took part in the Pope's funeral. As was reported in the *Daily Telegraph*, "The last sight of the coffin of a loved one is usually a melancholy moment but that was not how it seemed yesterday ... If anything, there was optimism in the air. It may have been the sight of so many different nations and confessions coming together in an atmosphere of respect. The section of the congregation set aside for religious leaders contained sheikhs and imams in turbans, patriarchs in the elaborate headgear of the Orthodox church, and black-clad rabbis in skullcaps. All in all,

Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon—who had sometimes found himself at odds with the pontiff on political issues—nevertheless remembered John Paul with warmth and respect as he opened a cabinet meeting on April 3, saying, “Pope John Paul II was a man of peace and a friend of the Jewish people, who was familiar with the uniqueness of the Jewish people and who worked for an historic reconciliation between the peoples ...Yesterday, the world lost one of the most important leaders of our generation, whose great contribution to rapprochement and unity between peoples, understanding and tolerance will be with us for many years.”²³

In an editorial on April 3, the *Jerusalem Post* wrote with obvious affection—and untempered honesty—about the impression the Pope had made in Israel, and what type of legacy his papacy would leave. “It was hard to fail to be touched by the compassion and dignity of this man who, though he represented one religion, came to symbolize the religious spirit to people of many faiths.” The editors spoke of the Pope’s “sincerity and empathy...in embodying the new doctrine [of Vatican II] into word and deed”—but they also pulled no punches in terms of actions by John Paul that had, at times, disappointed, confused or enraged world Jewry. They continued:

It is a measure of how far there is to go in relations between the Church and the Jews that even this pope chose to meet Yasser Arafat, for the first of 10 times, as

142 non-Roman Catholic religious leaders came to the funeral.” See: Patrick Bishop, Bruce Johnston and Jonathan Petre, “United by Grief, They Put Aside Their Differences to Celebrate the Life and Works of a Man Who Had Touched Their Lives,” *Daily Telegraph* (April 9, 2005), 2, Lexis Nexis Academic, web, accessed February 15, 2005.

²³ Agence France-Presse, “Israelis, Palestinians Unite in Homage to Pope as Champion of Peace,” *The Lebanon Daily Star* (April 4, 2012), <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/Apr/04/Israel-and-Palestine-united-in-honoring-Pope.ashx#axzz1yX21HNhg>, accessed February 15, 2013.

far back as 1982—which was before the PLO had renounced terrorism and when both the US and Israel had branded it a terrorist organization. One also wonders why in November 2003, while suicide attacks against Israeli civilians continued, the pope condemned terrorism, but also said of the security fence Israel was building to stop terrorists, “the Holy Land doesn’t need walls, but bridges.”²⁴

Interestingly, perhaps two of the most strident post-mortem criticisms of the late John Paul came from very different ends of the Jewish theological and political spectrum. The first came from the outspoken media commentator Shmuley Boteach, an American rabbi associated with the Chabad Lubavitch movement. In an April 4 article in the *Jerusalem Post*, Boteach argued that John Paul had been “the Pope who loved too much.” The overall tone of his criticism (following upon considerable praise earlier in the article) stands out, precisely because it is so different from that of many other spokespersons in the Jewish community worldwide. Rabbi Boteach speaks witheringly of John Paul’s outreach to Saddam Hussein’s Deputy Prime Minister, the Chaldean-rite Catholic Tariq Aziz, in the lead-up to the second U.S. war in Iraq,²⁵ and of the papal words of condolence expressed at the death of PLO leader Yasir Arafat, and he voices his own perception that the pope had not spoken out forcefully enough to condemn Osama bin Laden and his followers. Such actions—or lack of action—were, Boteach said, unworthy of a man who was, in so many other ways, a leader and example on the world stage. Such lapses of judgement, Boteach argued, reflected “an inexplicable

²⁴ “Pope John Paul II,” Editorial, *Jerusalem Post* (April 4, 2005), 13, Lexis Nexis Academic, web, accessed February 15, 2013.

²⁵ “Pope Tells Iraq to Respect UN,” *BBC News* (February 14, 2003), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2760005.stm, accessed February 15, 2013.

moral blindness [that] shall forever remain a stain on the legacy of an otherwise great man.” He continued:

Like a parent who cannot see the failings of a child, John Paul refused to accept that real evil lurks in the heart of men. He could not see that there were those whose actions had forever severed themselves from a compassionate Creator. John Paul loved the innocent but he never hated the wicked. He loved justice, but he all too seldom condemned injustice. He fought for the poor and the oppressed, but he would not—aside from Soviet Communists—fight their oppressors.

Declaring in word and deed that hatred of any sort was an ungodly emotion, John Paul II never summoned the faithful to have contempt for the wicked but instead extended them the considerable softness of his gentle touch. The result of such misguided affection is that as he departs this world widely loved and admired, he leaves behind a planet where it is American soldiers, fighting and dying for democracy, who are doing more to create a Godly Earth than even John Paul’s priests and pastors.

As a Jew, I shall forever remain indebted to John Paul for the respect and affection he extended to the Jewish people...But as an American I shall remain saddened that, as the world condemned America for removing the Taliban in Afghanistan and establishing a democracy in Iraq, the pope did not say that the real enemy is not those who fight evil, but those who soil God’s green Earth by drenching it in the blood of innocents.²⁶

²⁶ “The Pope Who Loved Too Much,” *Jerusalem Post* (April 4, 2005), 14, Lexis Nexis Academic, web, accessed February 15, 2013. It probably goes without saying that Boteach has somewhat overstated his case here; John Paul did, on dozens of occasions, publicly denounce violence, terrorism, ex-

The second prominent voice that castigated John Paul in the hours after his death was the well-known American Rabbi Michael Lerner, the founder of *Tikkun* magazine and the leader of the Tikkun social justice and spirituality movement (later the Network of Spiritual Progressives). Although Lerner offered some brief positive comments on the late Pope’s contributions, the vast majority of his assessment of John Paul (close to three pages in print) was negative. He explained this, writing:

It is the Jewish tradition that in remembering the dead, we talk honestly and not just say the good things. In fact, we consider it more of a respecting of the dead to acknowledge the full picture, and not only say what we admired, but also what challenged us. And we do that starting with the first times that we talk about the dead, in the eulogy, and during the period of mourning. Our tradition teaches us that it is this honest accounting that allows us to return from sadness in a healthy way, rather than by covering up parts that disappointed us or hurt us.

Lerner then offered a lengthy litany of his grievances with official Catholicism under the late pope: the silencing of progressive theologians (Leonardo Boff, Matthew Fox, etc.), John Paul’s judgement that the Church was not empowered to ordain women as priests, and the marginal role in which homosexuals were kept in Church life (he spoke of these last two issues as “[reaffirming] the most sexually repressive aspects of his tradition”). He contrasted the Church’s position regarding the inability of divorced and remarried Catholics to receive Communion with “the more humane attitudes of the Torah on this question and of most post-patriarchal societies and humane religious traditions.” The appointment of “the most

tremism and hatred, sometimes generically and sometimes in very specific terms, as even a cursory perusal of his Wednesday audience and Sunday Angelus addresses makes clear.

conservative and least socially conscious elements” to positions of leadership and influence, Lerner suggested, ensures that the Church “will continue to play a repressive and reactionary role in these matters.” Issues of human sexuality—particularly of birth control and access to abortion—became “the litmus test of seriousness and commitment to Catholic principles,” especially for those in public life:

The decision to privilege the sexual issues over the social justice issues was a response to the spirit of this papacy, and it was a moral disgrace to the Catholic world on the same level as the uncritical support for Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian people has been a moral disgrace for the Jewish world or the lack of criticism of anti-Semitism and terrorism has been a moral disgrace for much of the Islamic world ...

Lerner then touched on a number of issues more directly relevant to the Holocaust, and the way the pope’s decisions impacted on a Jewish community still deeply marked by its horrors:

We at *Tikkun* organized a demonstration against this pope when he visited San Francisco shortly after he had met with former Nazi soldier and later president of Austria Kurt Waldheim...We add with great sorrow that this pope contributed to making Pope Pius XII a saint—the pope who made a concordat with Hitler and who did pathetically little to save the Jewish people when we were being massacred in Europe. Though merely symbolic, that action symbolizes an unwillingness of the church to really take account of its disgraceful role not only with Hitler but with many other dictators in making accommodations to the most oppressive regimes in the modern world rather than fighting those regimes with every inch of its moral authority.

It was not, however, out of a sense of hatred for John Paul or for Catholicism that Lerner felt compelled to speak out so strongly, but in reaction to what he saw as an unbalanced and uncritical popular “canonization” of the Pope. Lerner saw his analysis as rooted in an appreciation for the deepest core values of Catholicism, and its traditional commitment to social justice and “progressive” thinking.

...[I]t is actually only because I feel a strong solidarity, an intrinsic connection, between my own connection to God and the connection to God of the Catholic world, and a strong affirmation of all that is deeply beautiful and moving in the [Catholic] tradition, that I feel a need to speak the deepest truth that I know as we witness a global mourning that partly obscures the reality of this pope and his legacy. But let me hasten to add that I critique some of his policies, but do not pretend to have any right to judge this person as a human being beyond the political impact he had on the world. I imagine that he was faced with immense pressures and constraints, that he moved as far as he could within the worldview that he inherited, and that his fundamental reality was that of a decent and good human being trying his best to serve God and humanity. You see that in his statements against war and violence. You see that in his attempts at [ecumenism] with other branches of Christianity. You see that in his statements on behalf of the downtrodden. So I pray [that] he will rest in eternal peace and be remembered also for all the good that he did.²⁷

²⁷A “Truly Heroic Figure,” *BeliefNet*, <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Catholic/2005/04/A-Truly-Heroic-Figure.aspx?p=2>, accessed February 15, 2013 (several typos in the original version of Lerner’s post have been corrected here). According to <http://www.resourcesforlife.com/library/people/michael-lerner/>, Lerner circulated this by email on April 3, 2005. This site does not indicate to whom the email was sent.

What becomes very clear in reviewing some representative Jewish reactions to John Paul II's death is that the evaluation differs—sometimes dramatically—according to the theological and moral yardstick that is used to measure him. To the degree that he is judged on his specific contributions to Jewish-Christian dialogue, voices are almost unanimous in lauding the deceased pontiff's revolutionary leadership in religious and political terms. They recognize that his lengthy papacy succeeded in putting Jewish issues solidly at the very heart of Catholic thinking and acting, and that many of his more “symbolic” actions communicated to the world a love and respect for the Jewish people that was shaped by his experience of pre-war and wartime Poland. On a personal level, and in his theological approach, Judaism was an esteemed “older brother” to Christianity, with whom a relationship of dialogue and sharing was both desirable and necessary. From the earliest days of his pontificate, until the final weeks before his death, Judaism and Jews were always on John Paul's “radar screen,” and he was prepared to take radical—and sometimes very controversial—steps to mend the Jewish-Catholic relationship and lead it in a very different direction. Both Jewish and non-Jewish analysts at the time of his death agreed that this would be a major piece of the Pope's historical legacy.

For those who saw the Catholic-Jewish relationship primarily through the lens of political issues and social justice, there was no question that John Paul's papacy was considerably more ambiguous. His meetings with world leaders like Kurt Waldheim and Yasir Arafat—after considerable protests from international Jewish groups—were seen as insensitive and wholly inappropriate, giving the tacit approval of the Holy See to figures whose past or present views were antithetical to Judaism and the State of Israel. The Church's advocacy of political and social positions at odds with mainstream Jewish thinking often made that relationship a strained and awkward one. Under John Paul II, the Catholic Church could be (and was)

viewed by some Jewish leaders as hide-bound and overly conservative, focusing on the wrong issues and issuing ambivalent statements on important topics such as terrorism in and against Israel. On issues of women's rights and approaches to homosexuality, some Jewish groups simply concluded that they had little common ground with official Catholicism—and some simply decided that there were other, more strategic, battles worth fighting.

As some commentators have suggested, John Paul's upbringing, in a Poland steeped in fairly traditional Catholicism, was, in turns, both his strength and his weakness.²⁸ It nourished his unshakeable commitment to social justice and human dignity, and provided him with the intellectual and lived framework out of which to view Judaism and Jews with respect, humility and commitment. Jews were not theoretical constructs to him, but had been among his closest friends from his childhood in Wadowice, and his deep theological reverence for Judaism as a biblical reality was matched with a sober awareness of Judaism as an ongoing living tradition, whose members in Europe had suffered horrifically for remaining faithful to their identity. Perhaps Tullia Zevi, the former president of the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, captured the challenge of John Paul's identity best when she said, “For me, he is two popes. He was the man of these solemn, groundbreaking acts who was open to the rest of the world, and he was the guardian and custodian of tradition. And in a certain sense, the ambiguity of his personality is also his greatness.”²⁹

In that sense, the Jewish response to John Paul was not entirely dissimilar from the Catholic response. Many

²⁸ Gerard Mannion, *The Vision of John Paul II: Assessing His Thought and Influence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 4-5.

²⁹ Glenn Frankel, “Pope Reconciled With Many but Made Special Effort With Jews,” *Washington Post* (April 7, 2005), A17, Lexis Nexis Academic, web, accessed February 15, 2013.

Catholics lionized Pope John Paul, for his championing of traditional Catholic values in an increasingly secularized West, or for the very public face he gave to Catholicism, through his frequent international pilgrimages and articulate public speeches and writings. Conservative commentators appreciated the clarity and coherence of his moral vision, his refusal to yield to the demands of political correctness, and his emphases on evangelization, piety and a more “evangelical” Catholicism. There were many other Catholics, however, who felt effectively frozen out of John Paul’s vision of Church, which they experienced as more patriarchal and less open to theological exploration, more centralized, and with less breathing room for local episcopates and the legitimate needs of inculturation. It was undoubtedly a more confident version of Catholicism—but had that confidence been accompanied by a diminishment of many of the promising directions of Vatican II, a certain theological and cultural “retrenchment”? Even today, John Paul II remains an often divisive figure in a Church which is fragmented by a variety of ecclesiological models and visions. He is a lightning-rod for criticism, and a standard-bearer for all that many people see as best and more beautiful in Catholicism. There is certainly no unanimity about how his nearly twenty-seven years as pope should be evaluated.

It may take decades before John Paul’s impact on inter-religious relations—and the Jewish-Catholic relationship in particular—can be fully and objectively analyzed. But even now, it is beyond question that the Pope born Karol Wojtyła gave Judaism and Jews a prominence in Catholic public life and teaching that they had never previously enjoyed. He spoke and acted as a friend and ally of the Jews and broke down historic barriers of misunderstanding and suspicion in a way that was both bold and encouraging. And if the constraints of his position, and of his own personality, did not always allow him to be the Pope some Jews (and some Catholics) would have liked, the progress he promoted created a space in which Jews

and Catholics could address each other with greater passion and directness, saying sometimes difficult things to each other in charity and respect. Paradoxically, the fact of the occasionally trenchant criticisms of John Paul by Jewish spokespersons attests to the solidity that relationship attained under him, which no longer necessitated the polite delicacy and diplomatic niceties of the early, uncertain years of Jewish-Catholic conversation. Strangers must speak to each other with a certain amount of restraint and hesitancy; friends can speak to other from the heart, even when their words may, for that very reason, be challenging and difficult to hear.

Dozens of images and metaphors were used for John Paul in the wake of his death: he was the “*Tikkun Olam* Pope,” “the true protagonist of Catholic-Jewish rapprochement” and, for more than a few people, “the best Pope the Jews ever had”—inheriting, and rightly so, an accolade first spoken of John XXIII in 1963. Pope Wojtyła’s tremendous contributions to that partnership necessarily left an immense void in the conversation when he died—and fears as to whether his impact would be a lasting one. Was John Paul II a “blip on the radar screen” of Catholic history, or had his words and actions succeeded in rooting a new understanding deeply enough that backsliding was now impossible? Rabbi James Rudin, the senior interreligious advisor for the American Jewish Committee, and a veteran of Catholic-Jewish dialogue, summed up the concern of many in April 2005, saying, “We know [John Paul’s] teachings while he was alive. Now that he’s gone, what will happen? That is the question...There is a concern that the new batch of priests may not be as enthusiastic about the reforms as their teachers and predecessors.”³⁰

³⁰ Quoted in Eric J. Greenberg, “Interfaith Leaders Ponder Future of Jewish-Catholic Ties; Pope John Paul II,” *The Forward* (April 8, 2005), 8, <http://forward.com/articles/3247/interfaith-leaders-ponder-future-of-jewish-catholi/>, accessed February 15, 2013.

Of course, the same concern may now be voiced about Benedict and his successor. A full analysis of Benedict's legacy deserves its own article, so I offer here just some points of comparison with that of his predecessor. There is no denying that the very different personal histories of John Paul and Benedict yielded very different prioritizations of the question of (and the importance of) Jewish-Catholic relations on the Catholic Church's agenda. John Paul's own childhood friendship with Jews, combined with his closer experience of the *Shoah* as a young man in Poland, instilled in him a sensitivity to and interest in Judaism unparalleled in the modern papacy—and probably in the entire history of the papacy itself. Both in his words and in his gestures, John Paul was a consummate communicator, always cognizant of the power of his global reach to provide leadership, sometimes in ways that were prophetic, unprecedented and controversial, even within his own circle of advisors. There can be no denying the groundbreaking quality of John Paul II's papacy as regards Judaism and Israel. There can equally be no denying that even this most "Jewishly sensitive" of popes sometimes made missteps and questionable judgements: the Waldheim audience in June 1987; aspects of the canonization processes of Edith Stein, Maximilian Kolbe, Pius IX and Pius XII; his 1979 reference to Auschwitz as "the Golgotha of the modern world."³¹ These were salutary reminders that even this most respectful of Catholic leaders did not always understand or conform to Jewish sensitivities, especially when they might seem to be at odds with his own understanding of the papacy, his personal spirituality, or the inescapably Polish Catholic matrix out of which he acted. As avant-garde as he was in many ways, and as many precedents as he set, even John Paul's record was a mixed one. Whether that was due to theological inconsistencies in his own mind and heart, external political factors, or the challenges

³¹ Kenneth L. Woodward, Loren Jenkins and Paul Martin, "The Pope's Triumph," *Newsweek* (June 18, 1979), 92, Lexis Nexis Academic, web, accessed February 15, 2013.

unique to the office of the papacy is for his biographers to determine.

Although much was initially made of Joseph Ratzinger's German background and his short service as a conscript in the German war effort,³² most of those involved in Jewish-Catholic dialogue acknowledge that Benedict has firmly and repeatedly denounced the Nazi atrocities³³ and has shown a genuine interest in and commitment to the burgeoning Jewish-Catholic relationship. In some ways, comparisons between the two pontiffs are awkward and necessarily unbalanced: John Paul became Pope at the age of 58, and led Catholicism for nearly

³² See, for example: Richard Bernstein and Mark Landler, "Pope Benedict XVI: The Nazi Years; Few See Taint in Service by Pope in Hitler Youth," *New York Times* (April 21, 2005), A12, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D00EFDF1731F932A15757C0A9639C8B63>, accessed February 15, 2013. During his visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex in May 2006, Benedict spoke of himself "as a son of the German people, a son of that people over which a ring of criminals rose to power by false promises of future greatness and the recovery of the nation's honor, prominence and prosperity, but also through terror and intimidation" ("Address at Auschwitz," May 28, 2006, *Dialogika*, <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-benedict-xvi/413-b1606may28>, accessed February 15, 2013).

³³ In a January 28, 2009 papal audience, Benedict spoke of "the ferocious extermination of millions of Jews and other innocent victims," and said, "While I renew my affection for and complete solidarity with our Brothers of the First Alliance, I urge that the memory of the Shoah lead humanity to reflect on the unforeseeable power of evil when it conquers the Human Heart. May the Shoah be a warning to all against oblivion, against denial or revisionism, because violence committed against any one single human being is violence against all humanity ... The Shoah teaches both the new and older generations that only the demanding journey of listening and dialogue, of love and forgiveness can lead the world's peoples, cultures and religions towards the desired goal of brotherhood and peace in truth. Never again may violence humiliate the dignity of man!" ("Pope on Shoah: Never Again May Violence Humiliate the Dignity of Man!", *Vatican Radio*, http://storico.radiovaticana.va/en1/storico/2009-01/26/1984_pope_on_shoah_never_again_may_violence_humiliate_the_dignity_of_man.html, accessed February 15, 2013.)

27 years; Benedict was elected at the advanced age of 78, and his papacy only spanned eight years. Benedict is, by many accounts, a somewhat more private and bookish person than John Paul, more reserved and less prone to dramatic public acts or statements. He has sought to move beyond the “first generation” of Jewish-Catholic dialogue (characterized by growing familiarity and warmth, and, at times, a certain “polite” delicacy or reticence in the relationship) to engage with some of the more substantive and debated theological matters about which Jews and Christians disagree. As was reported about a 2008 meeting with interreligious leaders:

The pope said that in their attempt to discover commonalities, religious leaders perhaps “have shied away from the responsibility to discuss our differences with calmness and clarity”...Pope Benedict said that “only by addressing these deeper questions can we build a solid basis” for peace and security...Today, Pope Benedict said, religious leaders have a duty to place these truth-seeking questions “at the forefront of human consciousness.”³⁴

This was clearly not a man who was going to skirt the more challenging issues raised by interfaith dialogue today.

Although he often spoke to religious groups about the importance and value of interreligious dialogue, Benedict also raised theoretical questions about the degree to which it is, strictly speaking, even *feasible*. In a 2008 private letter to Italian Senator Marcello Pera, the Pope, commenting on ideas put

³⁴ Regina Linskey, “Pope Meets Interreligious Leaders, Says Dialogue Discovers Truth,” *Catholic News Service* (April 17, 2008), <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0802110.htm>, accessed February 15, 2013.

forward in Pera’s book, *Why We Should Call Ourselves Christians*,³⁵ said:

You explain with great clarity that an interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the term is not possible, while you urge intercultural dialogue that develops the cultural consequences of the religious option which lies beneath. While a true dialogue is not possible about this basic option without putting one’s own faith into parentheses, it’s important in public exchange to explore the cultural consequences of these religious options.³⁶

In light of the ongoing debate about the role of Christianity in the cultural DNA of the European Union, Benedict (like Senator Pera) sought to rally Europe’s Jews and Christians, to resist what he sees as an aggressively secularist agenda, undermining the spiritual and moral foundations of Western culture.³⁷ As he said to a conference of European bishops in 2007:

...an authentic European “common home” cannot be built without considering the identity of the people of this Continent of ours. It is a question of a historical, cultural, and moral identity before being a geographic, economic, or political one; an identity comprised of a set of

³⁵ Encounter Books, 2011 (Italian original edition: *Perché dobbiamo dirci cristiani: Il liberalismo, l’Europa, l’etica*. [Mondadori, 2008]).

³⁶ The original letter is available on Senator Pera’s personal Web site: http://www.marcellopera.it/index_en.php?page=english_zoom.php&sct=1&cnt=106.

³⁷ For example, in his 2010 address at the Great Synagogue of Rome, he said, “Reawakening in our society openness to the transcendent dimension, witnessing to the one God, is a precious service which Jews and Christians can offer together.” (“Address at the Great Synagogue,” January 17, 2010, *Dialogika*, <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-benedict-xvi/660-b1610jan17>, accessed February 15, 2013).

universal values that Christianity helped forge, thus giving Christianity not only a historical but a foundational role vis-à-vis Europe. These values, which make up the soul of the Continent, must remain in the Europe of the third millennium as a “ferment” of civilization. If these values were to disappear, how could the “old” Continent continue to function as a “leaven” for the entire world? If ... the Governments of the Union wish to “get nearer” to their citizens, how can they exclude an element essential to European identity such as Christianity, with which a vast majority of citizens continue to identify?³⁸

Already in 2004, then-Cardinal Ratzinger had said, in a published French interview:

Europe is a cultural, and not a geographic, continent. It is its culture which gives it its common identity. The roots which have formed—and have allowed the formation—of this continent are those of Christianity; that is a simple fact of history. I have difficulties, therefore, with the resistance that has been expressed against the acknowledgement of such an undeniable fact... We must continue the debate about this question, because I fear that, hidden behind this opposition lies Europe’s hatred of itself, and of its great history.³⁹

³⁸ “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in the Convention Organized by the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community (COMECE),” March 24, 2007, *The Holy See*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070324_comece_en.html, accessed February 15, 2013.

³⁹ Sophie de Ravinel, “Identifier la Turquie à l’Europe serait une erreur,” *Le Figaro* (August 13, 2004), <http://home.scarlet.be/vexilla/ASN/Ratzingerturquie.pdf>, accessed February 15, 2013 (The original article is now available only to paid subscribers; my translation). See also Pope Benedict’s book *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (Basic Books, 2007).

Only days before his election as Pope, Benedict stressed how this conception of Europe as an essentially Christian region was, in fact, based upon (and therefore basically compatible with) the convictions at the heart of Jewish faith:

Neither are our Jewish fellow citizens offended by the reference to the Christian roots of Europe, in as much as these roots go back to Mount Sinai: They bear the sign of the voice that made itself heard on the mountain of God and unite with us in the great fundamental orientations that the Decalogue has given humanity. The same is true for the reference to God: It is not the mention of God that offends those who belong to other religions, but rather the attempt to build the human community absolutely without God.⁴⁰

In some ways, Benedict XVI could be viewed as unoriginal, treading familiar turf and reprising some of John Paul II’s more historic visits—to Auschwitz in May 2006, to the Holy Land in May 2009, and to Rome’s Great Synagogue in January 2010. In the first five years of his papacy, however, Benedict had already visited more synagogues than John Paul (including the Cologne synagogue in 2005 and the Park East Synagogue in New York in 2008). He interpreted, extended and built upon his predecessor’s substantial legacy, and Vatican observers reminded the world that the former Cardinal Ratzinger had, in

⁴⁰ “Cardinal Ratzinger on Europe’s Crisis of Culture (Part 4),” *Zenit News Agency* (April 1, 2005), <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/cardinal-ratzinger-on-europe-s-crisis-of-culture-part-4>, accessed February 15, 2013.

One of Benedict’s great religious allies in this debate was Great Britain’s Chief Rabbi, Dr. Jonathan Sacks, who has frequently issued similar warnings and critiques, such as his 2011 lecture in Rome, “Has Europe Lost Its Soul?” Pontifical Gregorian University/Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, December 12, 2011, http://www.unigre.it/eventi/Lord_Sacks/documenti/111212_PUG_BEA_testo_Lord_Sacks_en.pdf, accessed February 15, 2013.

fact, actively collaborated in many of John Paul's more memorable actions in the field of Jewish-Catholic relations.

If there is a single issue that perhaps overshadowed and distracted from Benedict's more positive gestures in Jewish-Catholic dialogue, it was his concerted attempts to foster reconciliation with the disciples of the late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who effectively rejected key aspects of the teaching of Vatican II—including its more positive, open approach to Judaism. Benedict's liberalization of the 1962 Latin Mass (with its Good Friday characterization of Jews as blind and benighted), and his lifting of the excommunications levied against four Lefebvrist bishops (one, Richard Williamson, a notorious minimizer of the Holocaust) provoked consternation among both Jews and Catholics, concerned that perhaps they were witnessing a symbolic backing-away from Vatican II's hard-won gains. The Vatican has, however, recently gone to considerable lengths to allay those fears, reasserting the indisputability of the conciliar magisterium, and denouncing the kinds of old-style antisemitism that have too often tainted the writings and speeches of some Lefebvrist spokespersons.⁴¹ The interfaith magisterium of Benedict XVI clearly bore Benedict's distinctive theological and pastoral stamp. It also demonstrated a profound continuity with John Paul's overall orientation, regularly citing his words and extolling his example. Eight years after his death, John Paul II remained very much alive and directive in Jewish-Catholic relations.

Few people were as actively involved in Catholic-Jewish relations as Rabbi Leon Klenicki. Before his death in January

⁴¹ Cindy Wooden, "Catholics Must Accept Vatican II, Including on Judaism, Cardinal Says" *Catholic News Service* (May 17, 2012), <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1202023.htm>, accessed February 15, 2013.

2009, he had served with distinction for many years as the Director of Interfaith Affairs for the Anti-Defamation League, working closely with the Vatican and the Pope. Among Klenicki's numerous publications was a volume bringing together all of John Paul's speeches and writings on Judaism, which Klenicki and Eugene Fisher had jointly edited, and which became a standard reference in Jewish-Catholic conversations.⁴² At the end of his essay introducing the final edition of this book, Klenicki wrote:

As no other Pope in history has been, Pope John Paul II will be forever recognized as the Pilgrim of Shalom and the Apostle of Reconciliation to the whole world. Strong and vital, sick and frail, he visited innumerable countries, bringing with him a spirituality cherished by Catholics and much appreciated by those who were neither Catholic, nor even Christian. Wherever he went, he preached the Word of God, sharing his experience of God's Presence, projecting the example of a committed religious life in an ideologically stormy and complicated spiritual time. It is hoped that his message of Shalom will inspire all the people of the Middle East and the world.⁴³

Klenicki's words captured, I believe, much of what was best, most memorable and most worthy of imitation about the Polish Pope. There can be no denying that Judaism and Jews were a central theological and cultural motif of his papacy, from the

⁴² The first edition, published in 1987, was simply titled *Pope John Paul II on Jews and Judaism: 1979-1986*. The second, expanded 1995 edition was called *Spiritual Pilgrimage: Texts on Jews and Judaism, 1979-1995*. The third and definitive edition, published in 2011 (and thus after Klenicki's and John Paul's deaths), was *The Saint for Shalom: How Pope John Paul II Transformed Catholic-Jewish Relations* (New York: Crossroad/Anti-Defamation League).

⁴³ Klenicki, "From Historical Mistrust to Mutual Recognition," in Klenicki and Fisher, *The Saint for Shalom*, 8.

days after his election until the final weeks before his death at the age of 84. And yet Klenicki also pointed out that John Paul's truly epic contributions had often failed to be effectively communicated to the grassroots of Catholicism in a way that made a difference in local life and practice. As Klenicki said at the time of John Paul's death, "Unfortunately, much of the good the pope has done in improving the Church's relationship with the Jewish people has not reached the pew level."⁴⁴

Eight years after John Paul's passing, and especially with Benedict's resignation, questions persist about the direction and nature of Catholic relations with Jews, and what priority they will hold for the Vatican in the future.⁴⁵ There continue to be strident (though fairly marginal) voices critical of John Paul's active engagement with non-Catholics and

⁴⁴ As quoted in Greenberg, "Interfaith Leaders Ponder..."

⁴⁵ John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Random House, 2009), 96, 132, discusses the challenges created by the demographic shifts in the Church away from its traditional European center and the consequences this will have for its leadership's dialogic priorities. Especially Islam but also Asian religions will play a greater role.

While Allen's observations may be correct on the demographic, geo-political and cultural levels, nevertheless the Catholic Church's connection to Judaism exists in a category by itself, both historically and theologically, since Judaism is necessarily inherent in Christianity's "religious DNA". As John Paul said at the Rome synagogue in April 1986, "The Jewish religion is not *extrinsic*, but, in a certain way, is *intrinsic* to our religion. With Judaism ... we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers, and in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers." ("Address at the Great Synagogue of Rome," *Dialogika*). Christianity has an organic relationship to Judaism that it does not have to any other faith, which is one of the key reasons why Judaism is the only one of the world's major religious faiths that is not included under the competence of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, but falls under the jurisdiction of its own, smaller dicastery, the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with Jews (political issues are dealt with by the Secretariat of State, the diplomatic arm of the Holy See).

non-Christians, who view his "Assisi mindset"⁴⁶ as pastorally misleading and theologically flawed.⁴⁷ What is almost certain is that that no future pope will have the degree of personal familiarity with or commitment to Judaism that John Paul II or even Benedict had. Will John Paul's example and legacy endure long in the Church?

It was with this question, and this concern, in mind that Rabbi Gerald Zelizer, of Neve Shalom Synagogue in New Jersey, offered what was, I believe, one of the most poignant—and hopeful—evaluations of John Paul's legacy in terms of Catholic-Jewish dialogue:

When Michelangelo was on his deathbed, his students at his bedside wailed: "Michelangelo, how will Rome ever get along without you?" To which, it is reported, Michelangelo faintly waved his hand to the window, with its vision of his sculptures and architecture, and whispered, "Rome will never be without me." Surely, John Paul would not be so boastful. But because he has reshaped the Catholic Church during his long tenure, we

⁴⁶ This term is sometimes used disparagingly of the ecumenical, Jewish-Catholic and interreligious outreach which characterized John Paul's papacy, and was summed up in the three interreligious gatherings he organized in Assisi, the hometown of St. Francis, in October 1986, January 1993 and January 2002, to which he invited leaders of the all world's major religious traditions (the Community of Sant'Egidio has organized subsequent Assisi gatherings, including one in 2011, which Benedict addressed). To those who consider interreligious dialogue and shared prayer as a falsification of traditional Catholic teaching, the Assisi gatherings came to symbolize for them all that was wrong with the (post-conciliar) Catholic Church.

⁴⁷ See, for example, the numerous articles on the Web site of the United States District of the Society of St. Pius X: http://www.ssp.org/news/assisi_iii/assisi_iii.htm.

Jews, “the elder brother,” are hopeful in declaring, “We Jews shall never be without you.”⁴⁸

A traditional Jewish expression of sympathy in the wake of a death is *Zikhrono li-verakhah*—“May his memory be for a blessing.” There seems little doubt that John Paul II’s life and papacy were, in so many ways, a blessing for the Catholic and Jewish communities, and for the renewed relationship between them. For his immediate successor, Benedict XVI, he clearly also served as a model. Future popes can choose to allow his memory to serve as a *paradigm*, a *springboard* and an *inspiration*, so that another generation of Catholics and Jews can commit themselves to pursuing with energy, commitment, respect and faith the dialogue which was so close to Pope John Paul’s heart, and which will remain such a key part of his historical legacy.

⁴⁸ “Respect for Faith’s ‘Elder Brother,’” *USA Today* (April 5, 2005), http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/columnist/2005-04-05-elder-brother_x.htm, accessed February 15, 2013.