

Eugene Korn
***Israel and the Nations:
The Bible, the Rabbis,
and Jewish-Gentile Relations***

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There are many books today dealing with Jewish-Gentile relations. Most of them read like extended encyclopedia articles, outlining various positions taken in the history of Jewish-Gentile relations and citing the appropriate texts. But very few of their authors indicate why they have been written other than to inform their readers about the various historical facts of Jewish-Gentile relations. Also, most of them do not indicate to whom they are speaking and what they are arguing for (if they are making an argument at all). As such, they are written for anonymous spectators. Eugene Korn's current book, however, is an exception. He argues for a disputed Jewish position regarding Jewish-Gentile relations (actually, he is almost totally concerned with Jewish-Christian relations), plus he explicitly addresses himself to his own particular Jewish community. In other words, Korn's book is a polemic. The main thrust of Korn's argument is that the thoughtful members of his community should be like him, active participants in Jewish-Christian dialogue for both theoretical and practical reasons.

Korn calls his Jewish community "Modern / Centrist / Zionist Orthodoxy," which differs considerably from those he calls "separatist Ultra-Orthodoxy" (who call themselves by the Hebrew term *Charedi* [for those who tremble before God]). The *Charedim* who eschew any intellectual contact with the non-Jewish world (and with much of the Jewish world too) are obviously opposed to any Jewish-Christian dialogue. Their chief authority, the late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, already in the 1960's (at the time of the Second Vatican Council) curtly ruled that interreligious dialogue is halakhically (i.e., legally) interdicted. But what about the Modern Orthodox community? What should their attitude be toward Jewish-Christian dialogue, especially when it includes theological topics? Are there any halakhic impediments to it, since being "Orthodox" means that minimally Halakhah must not interdict any proposed course of action? Maximally, Halakhah must mandate it.

Here Korn faces his biggest hurdle inasmuch as the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik seemed to have forbidden his Modern Orthodox followers from engaging in interreligious dialogue, especially with Christians (see his famous 1964 essay "Confrontation"). Korn takes on this challenge by arguing two points. First, Soloveitchik did not *halakhically* rule that interreligious dialogue is forbidden. Hence any Orthodox Jew who engages in it is not committing a legally-constituted transgression. Soloveitchik only suggested that it is fraught with danger for Jews, dangers reminiscent of the mediaeval disputations when Christians forced Jews to defend their religion against Christian supersessionist claims. Korn insists that that is no longer the case today when both Jews and Christians live in a pluralistic secular society, in which both are in some sense outsiders. Second, Korn argues that Soloveitchik did not rule out theological dialogue in the type of moral-political cooperation he did approve of in "Confrontation."

Nevertheless, both of Korn's arguments are themselves quite arguable. First, many in the Modern Orthodox community, like their counterparts in the *Charedi* community, accept the principle called *Da'as Torah*, namely, that not only the legal rulings but also the opinions on a broader range of topics by recognized halakhic authorities have normative force. The difference between the two Orthodox communities is *who* these authorities are (which ultimately derives from those who choose to follow them). Soloveitchik, even more than thirty years after his demise, is still *the* authority for the Modern Orthodox, hence even his opinions must be followed. In fact, many Modern Orthodox see no difference between Soloveitchik and Feinstein on the question of interreligious dialogue.

Furthermore, Soloveitchik speaks of "doctrines" (i.e., theological propositions) that *were not* subject to transformative discussion in the past. But why does this fact prohibit possibly transformative discussion of doctrines in the present? As a philosopher, how could Soloveitchik (or most of his disciples) avoid the famous is / ought conundrum: How does one derive a practical prescription (an "ought") from a theoretical proposition (an "is")? Here Korn is on stronger ground (as against most of Soloveitchik's disciples) insofar as he does not draw a proscription of dialogue from its seeming impossibility in the past. In fact, Korn shows how the conditions (i.e., political and cultural inequality) that in the past seemed to have been the reason for avoiding dialogue with Christians, are so changed as to now be the reason for engaging in dialogue with Christians in the present. That is, at present there seems to be more of an equal political and cultural space for interactive dialogue between Jews and Christians, plus the need to forge a common defense in the face of the real threat posed by militant secularists against both Jews and Christians (and perhaps against the adherents of other religions too) on issues of public morality in modern secular societies.

Finally, Korn's positive view of dialogue does raise some questions about how Jews might view and interact with Gentiles. Theoretically, Jews should seek to inform Gentiles what is expected of them from a Jewish theological perspective. At a minimum, this would include the seven Noahide laws, which alone include what is expected of them. However, in a dialogical setting, why would Jews not aim for something higher, beyond the Noahide minimum? Conversion to Judaism,

for willing Gentiles, would theoretically constitute for them a higher status than simply being a Gentile Noahide. Nevertheless, this would contradict the explicit prerequisite for dialogue that Jews have demanded of Christians: to forego using the dialogue with Jews for proselytizing purposes. This demand presupposes that neither Christians nor Jews should tell each other what to do or what not to do. Given Korn's positive view of dialogue, he needs to engage more with the question of Jewish goals for dialogue with Christians, goals that can be accepted by both Jews and Christians in good faith.

These are the questions I would address to Eugene Korn after reading his thoughtful book. It is hoped in his future writings he will respond to them.