Interfaith Relations

JEREMY KALMANOFSKY

Throughout history, in the many pagan, Christian, Muslim, and other societies where they have lived, Jews have wondered how to regard those other religions and their practitioners. Does the Torah demand that Jews be "a people that dwells alone" (Numbers 23:9), shunning non-Jews, remote from all potentially negative social, intellectual, and spiritual influences? Is social contact with non-Jews nothing but a first step toward assimilation? Does religious interchange necessarily promote syncretism? Such views are indeed found in Jewish literature. For example, the thirteenth century author of the *Sefer Ha-ḥinnukh* writes, "Let us banish the thought that there can be anything beneficial about any idolater, and let such a thought never come out of our mouths. Let them not find favor in our eyes whatsoever" (*Sefer Ha-ḥinnukh,* commandment no. 426).

But is this the only rational approach to living among gentiles? Could encountering other faith communities actually enhance Judaism and Jewish society? After all, the sages of antiquity themselves favored translating the Bible into Greek, so that "the beauty of Yefet [Greece] may dwell in the tents of Shem [among the Jews]" (*BT* M'gillah 9b). Moreover, are all other religions

to be considered in the same light? Might we consider some religions contemptible, while viewing others as sister-faiths rooted in similar spiritual values to our own?

To examine the *halakhah* as it applies to interfaith relations, we must examine both the rules of the system, as well as the ideological schemes that organize those rules. To stick to the rules alone would be superficial and not help us respond coherently to our neighbors.

Contemporary Conservative Jews must seek a dialectical balance with the adherents of other religions, becoming partners with them to work for the common weal, while also striving to maintain the boundaries that define our Jewish identity. For Jewish communities to thrive with religious and social integrity in a multicultural world, our borders must be firm, yet not brittle. We must affirm that certain cardinal practices and beliefs constitute the foundation upon which Jewish identity rests. We must also avoid reflexive defensiveness that views every outsider as a threat. We must appreciate what we can learn from every human being. Yet we must also appreciate that we can experience Judaism fully only within a covenantal community of Jews. In these matters, we may be guided by the wise pearl of the ancient sages: "If someone tells you there is wisdom among the nations, believe it. If someone tells you there is Torah among the nations, do not believe it" (*Eikhah Rabbah* 2:13). Those who seek to live guided by tradition should avoid narrow-mindedness whenever possible, yet the *halakhah* also insists we avoid idolatry at all costs.

This chapter will addresses normative religious teachings of several different faiths, as well as the communal interactions between Jewish institutions and those of other faiths. But before turning to those important questions regarding wider communities, we should also begin with some comments about the interpersonal ethics individual Jews should have toward gentiles. Although our covenantal community must maintain appropriate social and religious boundaries between Jews and those of other faiths, this warrants neither economic nor ethical discrimination against non-Jews. It is true that the classical *halakhah* mandates stricter ethical behavior vis-à-vis fellow Jews than toward gentiles; we also must concede that isolated *midrashim* speak negatively, even hatefully, about non-Jews. Nevertheless, the dominant trend for centuries has been to view the unethical treatment of non-Jews as *hillul ha-sheim*, as the desecration of God's name, which the Torah forbids (Leviticus 22:32). Though religious and social barriers separate us from non-Jews in some ways, ethical obligations still bind us all together as human beings created in God's image. This duty finds apt expression in the teaching of Rabbi Moses of Coucy, one of the halakhic greats of thirteenth-century

France, who wrote in his magnum opus, the *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* (negative commandment 2, ed. Venice, p. 7c): "I have preached throughout our Diaspora that those who lie to gentiles and steal from them are guilty of profaning God's name. For they cause gentiles to say, 'There is no Torah among the Jews.' But as the prophet Zephaniah said, 'The remnant of Israel will not do wickedness and will not speak falsely, and deceptive speech will not be found in their mouths'" (Zephaniah 3:13).

Idolatry

Over the centuries, Jews have viewed other religions first and foremost through the prism of opposition to idolatry. If a given religion was idolatrous, both the cult and its adherents were—depending on political circumstances—hated, shunned, or condemned to destruction. If a cult was not overtly idolatrous, Jews could be more amicable neighbors. Given that the Talmud generally presumes gentiles to be idolaters—with only exceptional individuals earning better evaluations (see e.g., *BT* Avodah Zarah 65a)—classical Judaism does not always make it easy to build bridges. Nonetheless, today we must try. In the era of al-Qaeda, when religious extremism has been so lethal, and not least of all to Jews, all modern, well-intentioned people should seek interfaith comity and hesitate to anathematize anyone.

Given our contemporary pluralistic inclinations, one might ask whether Judaism should still condemn idolatry so strongly. In today's world, should we discard this traditional attitude and instead live and let live, criticizing no other faith and asking others for the same generosity?

Yet the *halakhah* demands that our Jewish communities not tolerate *avodah zarah,* or "alien worship." We need not seek out pagans to challenge in polemics, but there is no room in Judaism for idolatrous practices. To understand why, let us begin with the first two of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2–5):

> I am the Eternal your God who brought you out of Egypt, the house of bondage. Have no other gods besides Me. Make yourself neither idol nor image of anything that is in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the water beneath the earth. Do not prostrate yourself to them, nor cause them to be worshiped, for I the Eternal your God am a jealous God. . . .

These theological commandments teach two cardinal principles of Judaism: monotheism and the prohibition regarding the use of icons in worship. These *mitzvot* are inviolable. The Talmud demands that one should die

rather than transgress them (*BT* Sanhedrin 74a). Faithful to these commandments, we keep faith with Judaism's central, two-fold religious insight: first, that there is only one God in all realms, including heaven and earth, matter and spirit, and life and death; and second, that God may not be rendered in images carved in wood and stone. Instead, Jews who want to see God should look at the human being, created in the divine image; should study the Torah, a record of God's wisdom and will; and should look to history where God's acts and ours move the world toward redemption. Since God is one, unique and ineffable, Jews must venerate only the infinite God who animates all. In retelling the famous *midrash* in which Abraham destroys his father's idols (found at *B'reishit Rabbah* 38:13), Maimonides writes:

> At age forty, Abraham became aware of his Creator. Once he attained this awareness, he began to argue with the residents of Ur, saying: "Your path is not the true path." He smashed the idols and began to teach people that it is improper to worship any but the eternal God. To God alone it is proper to bow and sacrifice, so that *all subsequent generations will know God.* Thus it is proper to destroy and smash all images, *so that none will err and think that the mere images are God* (*MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 1:3; emphasis added).

Maimonides' formulation properly emphasizes the theology behind the law, which teaches that God alone is worthy of worship. In this spirit, a guiding principle in our interfaith contacts is that Conservative Jews must shun any activity that blurs our commitment to image-free monotheism.

What exactly is idolatry in halakhic terms? The Bible's wrath was directed partly against polytheistic belief in foreign deities (as Maimonides explains at *MT* Hilkhot Y'sodei Ha-torah 1:6), but the prophets also fought against the use of icons. These two realms of idolatry—improper belief and improper practice—are not necessarily identical. The Talmud, for example, knows that even rank idolaters can hold monotheistic beliefs: "Beyond Tyre and Carthage, where nations know neither Israel nor their heavenly father," they still recognize a single, ultimate transcendent divinity, a "God of gods" (*BT* M'naḥot 110a). Indeed, the simplest interpretation of the golden calf story in Exodus 32 is not that the Israelites followed a false god, but that they tried to render the true God in molten gold. (See the interpretation of this story by Rabbi Judah Halevi in the *Kuzari* 1 97.) Even a Jew who believes in God alone but who venerates one specific aspect of divine creation above all others strays into idolatry. Thus, the *halakhah* proscribes all tangible representations of the Divine, as Maimonides explains: "The essence of

the prohibition against idolatry is that we not worship any of the created beings—neither angel, nor sphere, nor star, nor physical element nor anything fashioned from physical elements—even if one knows that the Eternal is God" (*MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 2:1).

Thus, wrong belief alone is not the only thing that makes one an idolater. Wrong worship can be equally decisive. Indeed, until Maimonides' day, classical halakhic sources tended to define idolatry less by its errant theology and more by specific forbidden acts, such as kissing or bowing to an idol. Additionally, the Torah's revulsion at idolatry inspired the sages of the Talmud to legislate numerous other measures to keep Jews far from idols.

An object is considered an idol if it meets any of a number of conditions. Worshipers must ascribe divinity to the object and to the being the image depicts. (Therefore, images of ordinary humans are not idolatrous, but those which represent individuals presumed to be endowed with supernal powers are likely to be.) Furthermore, worshipers must commonly venerate the object in physical ways, such as by bowing down to it or kissing it, and the object itself must have been created for that purpose even if people have not yet worshiped it. Finally, the object in question must be something formally singled out for worship. Thus, a sacred tree might be an idol, since a human could have planted it for religious purpose, but no amount of idolatrous worship, no matter how fervent or intense, could render a sacred river or mountain into an idol.

Once one has identified what constitutes an idol, the sages of talmudic times considered it a biblical violation to enter or even pass through a city with an idolatrous shrine (*MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 9:9–10). Indeed, they understood the Torah to forbid even looking at an idol—let alone studying the practices and theology of idolatry. Also, it is forbidden to derive any monetary or personal benefit from idols or even from the accouterments of idol worship. It is forbidden to enter an idolatrous shrine, even to get out of the rain. Certainly one must not make or sell idols, nor even the incense used in idol worship. One must not patronize a store whose profits subsidize idolatry. One may not even mention the name of a god worshiped by means of idols. (These laws derive from *MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim, chapters 2–5, *passim*.) In addition to these restrictions, which were understood to be legislated by the Torah, the talmudic sages added strictures of their own. For instance, one must keep four cubits away from an idol, lest one be seduced by its appeal. One must not bend before an idol, not even to pick up money or to remove a thorn from one's foot. Nor may one may drink from an idol-shaped fountain, lest fellow Jews see and mistakenly suspect their comrade of apostasy (*SA* Yoreh Dei·ah 150:1–2).

Idolaters

In addition to shunning idols and their rites, Judaism demanded that Jews keep far from idolaters themselves. Deuteronomy 7:2 proscribes making a covenant with the Canaanite residents of the Land, and exhorts *v'lo t'ḥoneim.* This phrase, most simply translated "grant them no quarter," was interpreted as banning Jews from admiring anything about idolaters, from their physical beauty to their culture (*BT* Avodah Zarah 20a). Maimonides explained the principle behind this law: praising an idolater "causes one to be bound to him and to learn from his wicked deeds" (*MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 10:4). (Incidentally, this same Bible verse and this passage from Maimonides also served as the basis of the infamous December 2010 ruling by Rabbi Samuel Eliyahu, chief rabbi of Safed, forbidding renting property in Israel to gentiles. Although many nationalist rabbis endorsed this view, an even greater number condemned it, including those from ultra-Orthodox, national religious, and liberal streams.)

Maimonides' formulation neatly epitomizes the ancient talmudic sages' broad tendency to impose maximum distance between Jews and non-Jews. This distancing tendency can be seen through the Talmud's application of the biblical prohibition of mimicking the customs of the gentile nations in general. In all ways—including the way they cut their hair or the way they tie their shoelaces—Jews should be distinct. Discussing this view, Maimonides cites several Torah verses and summarizes: "All these address a single overriding concern, that we not resemble them. Instead, Jews should be distinct and recognizable in dress and in all their deeds, just as they are in their knowledge and attitudes" (*MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 11:1; cf. Leviticus 18:3, 20:23, and Deuteronomy 12:30). History attests that we have not always remained as distinct as Maimonides proposes. Today, most Jews rarely dress differently from their neighbors. Moreover, few Jews today share the basic assumption that Jews are best off keeping far away from non-Jews. Indeed, modern Judaism itself is at least partly a result of openness toward the gentile world. Most modern Jews see ethical value in setting aside restrictions in which we ourselves would build our own ghetto walls, and instead seek to integrate into a harmonious multicultural society. Today, the prohibition against imitating *ḥukkot ha-goyim*—the customs of non-Jewish peoples—should not be invoked to prevent or limit interaction with other faiths. However, this prohibition should help us maintain distinctions between Judaism and other faiths by forbidding Jewish participation in some religious or quasi-religious cultural practices. An obvious application of *ḥukkot ha-goyim* for North Americans would be to prohibit Jews from having Christmas trees in their

homes, even if their intention is not to celebrate Jesus's birth, but merely to keep up an American custom.

One primary way the ancients sought to isolate Jews from non-Jews was by preventing them from eating together. By keeping Jews and gentiles apart at the table, they hoped to discourage intermarriage and to shelter Jews from the seductions of idolatry (Deuteronomy 7:1–4, as amplified at *BT* Avodah Zarah 35b–36b). For this reason, the sages of late antiquity prohibited drinking wine produced by gentiles, even when unrelated to cultic libation, and eating most food cooked by non-Jews, including bread. As a safeguard against intermarriage, these restrictions apply equally to gentiles who worship idols and to those who do not.

Even in talmudic times, however, the prohibition against eating "gentile bread" was observed at best sporadically. Today, this rule applies at most to a private baker, who shares his or her own family's bread with Jews, thus encouraging a social relationship. But when there is no Jewish baker in town, or when gentile bread is of higher quality, one may buy from a gentile commercial baker whose bread can be eaten without establishing a social relationship (*BT* Avodah Zarah 35b, *SA* Yoreh Dei·ah 112:2 and 112:5). Thus breads manufactured industrially can be certified kosher, even though they are prepared by gentiles.

With respect to other foods, according to classical standards even otherwise kosher food cannot be considered permissible if it was cooked entirely by non-Jews. Hence, in kosher restaurants and in the kitchens of kosher caterers who work with exclusively gentile staff, the *kashrut* supervisor ignites the ovens at the beginning of each day and stirs the pots personally, thus taking a symbolic role in preparing the food (*BT* Avodah Zarah 38a–b). The same is true of many factory-produced foods under *kashrut* supervision, although certain technical leniencies can eliminate the need for a Jewish role in industrial cooking. But in general, absent significant or at least symbolic Jewish participation, the classical *halakhah* forbids most food cooked by gentiles.

With respect to wine, the tradition is even stricter. Wine produced by idolaters (called in Hebrew *yein nesekh*) is traditionally forbidden to a Jew even for commercial benefit; since we assume the idolater intended to pour some of it out as a ritual libation, such wine has effectively become an accouterment to idolatry (*MT* Hilkhot Ma·akhalot Asurot 11:1). The sages later ruled that wine of a non-idolatrous gentile, or wine clearly not intended for ritual use (called in Hebrew *s'tam yeinam*) is permissible for commerce, but forbidden for consumption lest it lead to social, and then to more intimate, intercourse. Among Conservative authorities, Rabbi Elliot Dorff's 1985 CJLS responsum recommends that the social prohibitions against gentile wine

should "fall into disuse, without protest." He wrote, "If I thought for one minute that prohibiting wine made by gentiles would have the slightest effect on diminishing the number of mixed marriages, I would drop all other concerns and prohibit it on that basis alone. I frankly doubt, however, that prohibiting [gentile wine] will have any effect whatsoever on eliminating or even mitigating that problem" (*CJLS Responsa 1980–1990,* p. 309). But Rabbi Dorff wrote that it is preferable, especially for ritual purposes, to use only wine with *kashrut* certification, because some wines, especially better quality products, may include substantively non-kosher ingredients (ibid., p. 301).

Conservative Jews should follow Rabbi Dorff's direction, focusing on the substantive *kashrut* of our food and wine, and not on who cooks it or with whom we eat it. Given overwhelming changes in our attitudes toward gentiles, the original social context of this legislation no longer applies. A ban on eating food prepared by gentiles will not reduce intermarriage among Jews who attend school, work, and live with non-Jews. For this reason, a Conservative rabbi supervising the *kashrut* of a restaurant or caterer need not insist that a Jew take part in the cooking. On the other hand, Orthodox authorities disagree that changing social mores can overrule classical prohibitions. Contemporary communities lack the authority to reject what ancient sages prescribed, they say, and they therefore continue to observe the rules against gentile food. Many of these issues are discussed elsewhere in this volume by Rabbi Paul Drazen in his chapter about the *kashrut* laws.

Islam

The *halakhah* does not view all non-Jewish religions as idolatrous. "Righteous gentiles" will also reach the World to Come, the classical sages taught—a claim that would be absurd if all non-Jewish faiths were forms of idolatry (*T* Sanhedrin 13:2.) The rabbis of ancient times further developed the concept of the Noahide laws, seven basic precepts that should be common to all societies, including prohibitions of idolatry and blasphemy as well as precepts of ethics and social justice. These Noahide laws establish the grounds on which other religions may be seen as suitable partners for interfaith relations.

Islam is easy to analyze in these terms. Though its claim to possess the ultimate supersessionist revelation obviously is not our view of God's will, Islam teaches monotheism with great rigor, bans idolatry even more stringently than does Judaism, and seeks a just social order. Since geonic times, the vast majority of halakhic rulings have understood Islam to be a non-idolatrous Noahide faith (Maimonides, *Responsa,* ed. Blau, responsum 448 (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1957–1986), vol. 2, pp. 725–728; *MT* Hilkhot Ma·akhalot Asurot 11:7). Indeed, the entire thrust of Maimonides' famous "Epistle on Martyr-

dom" is to defend Moroccan Jews who at least outwardly adopted Islam during a period of intense persecution. Admitting it would have been pious to choose martyrdom—as the Talmud certainly seems to mandate and as most rabbis counseled—nonetheless Maimonides urges Jews to "not choose death," since there is nothing inherently idolatrous in Islam. Ideally, though, he said, Jews should emigrate to escape martyrdom or practice their Judaism in secret (*Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership,* ed. Halkin and Hartman [1985; reprint, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993], p. 30).

The consensus of authorities is not to shun Islam. It is permitted to enter mosques, to observe Muslims at prayer, to possess Muslim artifacts, and to read Islamic sacred writings. If such an unlikely circumstance arose, Jews could conduct their own prayer service inside a mosque, or share space with a mosque or Islamic school (see the comments of Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef in his responsum *Yabbi·a Omer,* part 7, Yoreh Dei·ah 12, ed. Jerusalem, 1993, pp. 226–228).

Christianity

Evaluating Christianity is more complicated. To begin with, the Talmud explicitly labels Christianity as a form of idolatry and treats Sunday as an idolatrous holiday (in uncensored manuscripts at *BT* Avodah Zarah 6b). Moreover, normative Christian doctrine insists that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, at once a mortal man and the second "person" in God's triune personality. Most Jews saw this as unambiguous polytheism. Moreover, since most churches were filled with icons depicting a person whom the worshipers regard as divine, the case for shunning Christianity was quite strong. Indeed, rabbis in Islamic lands unanimously condemned Christianity outright as idolatrous. (See, e.g., Maimonides, *MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 9:4. Current editions of the *Mishneh Torah* read here that "Canaanites" are considered idolaters, but most manuscripts read "Christians." It seems that the text was emended, most probably from fear of censors.)

However, rabbis in medieval Christendom sought accommodation with the dominant religion, rather than total rejection. Rabbi Jacob ben Meir (better known as Rabbeinu Tam, 1100–1171) proposed a novel interpretation, which had the effect of permitting wider interactions, especially business dealings, with Christians. Rabbeinu Tam argued that the Torah imposes a stricter standard of idolatry on Jews than the Noahide code imposes on gentiles. While Jews must worship God alone with no subsidiary powers, he wrote, gentiles were permitted to take oaths "combining the name of heaven with something else." (This "something else" was taken first to refer the saints and later even to the trinity itself. Adapting a talmudic term, Rabbeinu Tam called this theology *shittuf,* or "associationism." See the comments of Tosafot to

BT Sanhedrin 63b, *s.v. asur*.) In this view, a Jew who practiced Christianity surely was guilty of idolatry, while his French neighbor could swear to Jesus or Mary without breaking Noahide law. Apparently, these medieval rabbis knew enough about Christianity to recognize that Christians combined a basic faith in the God of Israel with practices that depart from aniconic monotheism. Thus, Rabbeinu Tam and other rabbis of medieval Europe generally regarded Christians as "idolaters who do not worship idols" (Tosafot to *BT* Avodah Zarah 2a, *s.v. asur*).

This line of reasoning was the subject of significant disagreement among later sages. Many, like Rabbi Moses Isserles (commenting on *SA* Oraḥ Ḥayyim 156), affirmed the associationist concept and concluded that Christianity was a permissible religion for Noahides. Many others followed Rabbi Ezekiel Landau (in his responsum *Noda Bihudah*, second ed.: Yoreh Dei·ah 148, ed. New York, 1960, pp. 92–93) in rejecting this as a mistaken interpretation of Rabbeinu Tam's own view. These rabbis held that a distinction between Noahides and Jews could permit a Jew to accept a Christian's oaths, but could not sustain the definition of associationism as proper Noahide monotheism. This latter position is generally espoused by most Orthodox authorities. In our day, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef among Sephardim (in his responsum in the *Y'ḥavveh Da·at* 4:45) and Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg among Ashkenazim (in a responsum in his *Tzitz Eliezer* vol. 14, responsum 91 [ed. Jerusalem, 1981, pp. 166–168]), explicitly consider Christianity to be *avodah zarah*, idolatry.

Yet some in the tradition laid the seeds of a more pluralistic view. Rabbi Menaḥem Meiri, a giant of thirteenth century Provence, argued that Christianity's monotheism and ethics grant it special status. "They worship God in some sense, though their faith is far from ours," the Meiri wrote in his talmudic commentary *Beit Ha-b'ḥirah* at *BT* Bava Kamma 38a. Furthermore, he believed the strict quarantine the Talmud pronounces on idolaters "applies only to those ancient people who were not bound by the ways of religion. They were perpetually absorbed in the worship of idols, stars, and talismans, which are the very essence of idolatry . . . so that every sin and every foul thing was lovely in their eyes" (*Beit Ha-b'ḥirah* to *BT* Avodah Zarah 26a). Rabbi Joseph Karo and the Rema report this position sympathetically in the *SA* Yoreh Dei·ah 148:12. It also bears mentioning that even Maimonides—who, as we saw, explicitly labels Christianity as idolatry—regards the daughter religion as playing a part in providential history in light of its success in bringing Hebrew scriptures to all corners of the world. (These comments appear in uncensored editions of *MT* Hilkhot M'lakhim U-milḥ'moteihem, ch. 11.)

Meiri's critical innovation was to shift the definition of gentile idolatry from a ritual to an ethical one. Surpassing the pragmatic lenience of Rabbeinu Tam, Meiri evaluated non-Jewish cultures less by how they worship in their shrines

and more by how they act in society. While ancient idolaters "were polluted in their deeds and foul in their traits," Meiri wrote, "nations bound by the ways of religion, which are innocent of such foul traits, and indeed which punish such behavior, doubtless are not the subject of such laws at all" (*Beit Ha-b'ḥirah* commentary to *BT* Avodah Zarah 22a). This does not lessen the demand that Jews shun idolatry in their own lives. But Meiri teaches that our openness toward non-Jews should be contingent on their ethical standards, and not on the details of their religious rituals. Conservative Jews should adopt this orientation and carry it forward. Following the opinion of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook (as expressed in his *Epistles,* no. 89, volume 1 [Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-rav Kook, 1962], p. 99), we reject Christianity for ourselves but we need not reject Christian society as a whole: "The correct view is that of the Meiri, that all nations which are bound by proper interpersonal ethical norms are considered as resident aliens [the biblical *geir toshav*] with respect to all human ethical obligations." The ancient definition of a *geir toshav* is a non-Jew who lives with Jews and aligns him or herself with Israel, but does not fully convert to Judaism. Since none may aspire to the status of *geir toshav* without fully renouncing idolatry, Rabbi Kook clearly must understand Christianity as a kind of Noahide monotheism. For his part, Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog, Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Israel from 1937 to 1959, ruled similarly that the State of Israel must tolerate Christian churches in the Holy Land: "Christians regard themselves as monotheists. Although we cannot understand how they dilute their faith in the unity of the Creator with the [concept of the] trinity, one cannot deny that they have a concept, however strange, of there existing a provident Creator of the world" (*T'ḥumin* 2 [1981], pp. 174–175).

May a Jew visit a church? Since Christianity is forbidden to Jews, virtually all Orthodox authorities forbid entering a church, even when services are not being held, and even where actual icons are absent. Indeed, the most lenient Orthodox position of which I am aware is that of Rabbi Judah Herzl Henkin, who permits entering Unitarian or very liberal Protestant churches (those that do not accept the divinity of Jesus) when services are not actually occurring, although he advises against doing so lest observers mistakenly suspect one of entering conventional Christian churches (*She'eilot U-t'shuvot B'nei Vanim* [Jerusalem: J. H. Henkin, 1997] no. 35, p. 117). But the dominant view is that even visiting a church to study its art and architecture is forbidden (so Rabbi H. D. Halevi in his *Aseih L'kha Rav* 1:59 [Tel Aviv: Ha-va·adah L'hotza·at Kitvei Ha-ga·on . . . Halevi, 1978], pp. 178–181), as is entering a church to vote in a secular election at a polling station there (so Rabbi Menashe Klein in his *Mishneh Halakhot,* vol. 6, responsum 139 [New York: M'khon Mishneh Halakhot Gedolot, 2000], p. 168). Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik is reported to have instructed students not to watch John F.

Kennedy's Catholic funeral on television, asking, "What is the difference between entering a church, which is forbidden, or bringing the church into your own house?" (Rabbi Zvi Schechter relates this anecdote in his book on Rabbi Soloveitchik, *Nefesh Ha-rav* [Jerusalem: Reishit Y'rushalayim, 1994], p. 230.)

Conservative *halakhah* should rule differently. Following Rabbeinu Tam and the Meiri, if Christianity is not idolatrous for gentiles, then there can be no biblical prohibition against observing Christian services or rituals, or even in facilitating Christian worship for Christians. At most, the prohibition against visiting a church should be understood as a rabbinic decree which we should let lapse in our day, as one of the class of rabbinic prohibitions which can be set aside *mi-shum eivah,* "because it would cause hatred" between Jews and gentiles. And it certainly would cause friction if we told our neighbors we would refuse to enter their churches because we regard them as pagans! Since it is often proper, neighborly, and civic-minded to attend the worship services of other faiths—to attend a friend's wedding, for example, or to attend a funeral—in such cases one may enter a church as an invited guest even during worship services. To be sure, Jews are absolutely forbidden from attending Christian services as worshipers or from seeking spiritual fulfillment by doing so, or from imitating Christian ways in general. To serve a larger social purpose, however, visiting church services is permissible. Needless to say, this view permits Jews to enter a church building for wholly secular purposes, like meetings or public events.

When visiting a church service, Jews should not participate in the singing of hymns or the recitation of prayers, and they should certainly not join in any rituals. Without being rude, one should make it clear that one has come as a Jewish visitor to a Christian service, not to explore the possibility of converting. Given Christianity's long history of missionary activity aimed specifically at Jews, concerns of *marit ayin*—the obligation not only not to do wrong, but also not to appear as though one is doing wrong—apply. One should be additionally strict, keeping greater distance from Christians who continue to proselytize among our people. Jews for Jesus and other groups of so-called "messianic Jews" recruit Jews to apostasy and should be completely shunned. That this policy should apply even posthumously was the conclusion of a 1994 responsum by Rabbi Paul Plotkin, which was approved by the CJLS and published in *CJLS Responsa 1991–2000,* pp. 400–402 (cf. the concurring opinion paper by Rabbi Myron S. Geller published in that same volume, pp. 403–407).

Might a synagogue invite a Christian representative to speak during services or in some other context? If Christianity is not idolatry, such an invitation is conceivable in principle, and a community's choice is left to its taste and best judgment. But the demands of *marit ayin* require that Jews consider invit-

ing only Christians whom they know to respect Judaism, and who are in no way involved with missionary work among Jews.

May a Jew possess or sell Christian artifacts? Although we follow Rabbeinu Tam in regarding Christians as "idol worshipers who do not worship idols," Catholics and Eastern Christians do in fact make images of a man they take to be divine and bow to them in devotion. Thus, Jews must not derive monetary or personal benefit from Christian icons that will be worshiped. But Jewish jewelers or merchants are permitted to sell crosses as jewelry or as decorative pieces, since they are only symbols of Christian belief or piety, but are not themselves worshiped. The Rema developed this distinction: "Images to which people bow are considered as idols and are forbidden unless formally nullified [of their religious character]. But a pendant that merely hangs around the neck is a mere remembrance. It is not considered an idol, and it is permitted for a Jew to derive financial benefit from it by selling or displaying it" (gloss of the Rema to *SA* Yoreh Dei·ah 141:1). This view is carried farthest by Rabbi Joseph Saul Nathanson (1808–1875) who permitted Jews to wear cross-shaped military medals, since such medals are obviously not objects of worship, but simply tokens of the king's gratitude and esteem (*Sho·eil U-meishiv* [1886; reprint, Jerusalem and New York: Hotza·at S'farim Shoneh Halakhot, *s.a.*], vol. 1, sect. 3, no. 71, pp. 28b–29b).

This distinction provides the basis for permitting Jews to possess *objets d'art* that depict even pagan, let alone Christian themes. The Rema's point derives from the Talmud's view that some images are for aesthetic value rather than cultic worship (see, e.g., the clear formulation of this principle at *BT* Avodah Zarah 41a). Thus, a very fortunate art dealer might buy or sell Michelangelo's Pietà, since that statue, while Christian, is not a cultic icon. Pagan sculpture poses different questions, since a statue of a Greek god may well have been worshiped in its time. Nonetheless, since there are no more Venus- or Hermes-worshipers today, one may regard such a statue as nullified of religious character and now logically to be considered an exclusively aesthetic object. However, a Jew should not buy, sell, or possess the actual icons of currently practiced pagan religions.

Can Jews pray in a church? Practically speaking, this question is settled by precedent. Either as new communities or because of building damage, many non-Orthodox congregations in fact do rent space from churches. This practice is grounded in the designation of Christianity as Noahide monotheism, not as idolatrous paganism. Most halakhic authorities permit Jewish prayer in a mosque on just this logic. When using church spaces, however, Jews must remove or conceal all Christian symbols.

Can a synagogue open its building to Christian worship? The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards unanimously endorsed Rabbi Elliot Dorff's

1990 argument that synagogues may rent space to non-proselytizing churches (*CJLS Responsa 1980–1990,* pp. 165–184). Rabbi Dorff suggested it may be preferable to offer the social hall before classroom or sanctuary space; however, if necessary, classrooms or sanctuaries may also be used. In that case, Rabbi Dorff recommended that a physical barrier be used to separate the Holy Ark from the Christian service, but that Christians should be permitted to use their own religious symbols while worshiping in synagogues. The Rema's distinction between decorative crosses and icons that actually are venerated during worship suggests a further stringency: one should permit Christians to bring in only decorative symbols but not statues or icons that actually will be worshiped. Additionally, Rabbi Dorff argues one must distinguish between churches that actively, let alone aggressively, seek Jewish converts and those that do not. Being equitable and neighborly is a great value; but to paraphrase King Ahasuerus (Esther 7:8), God forbid that Jews should be drawn to another religion in their own home!

One of the strict prohibitions regarding ancient idolatry appears to pose a natural question about Christianity. Since it is forbidden to mention the name of alien gods (Exodus 23:13, *BT* Sanhedrin 63b, *MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 5:11), is it permissible to mention the name of the man Christians take to be divine? Traditional practice is usually strict, as we find Jesus of Nazareth often referred to in halakhic sources by the epithets *oto ha-ish* (that man) or *ha-talui* ("the crucified one"). However, the *halakhah* actually forbids only saying names that indicate divinity (see *Hagahot Maimoniyyot* commentary to *MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 5:10, note 3). Uncensored versions of that commentary expressly note that it is permissible to say Jesus's name, "although he is the greatest of all gentile gods." For his part, Maimonides consistently refers to Jesus by his Hebrew name Yeshua (e.g., at *MT* Hilkhot T'shuvah 3:10, uncensored versions), and others use the shortened form, Yeshu. (This abbreviated version was adopted to avoid suggesting that Jesus "saves," as the semantic meaning of Yeshua would indicate.) However, the epithet "Christ" affirms Jesus as "messiah" and "savior," and has been taken by centuries of Christians to imply Jesus's divinity. Therefore, Jews should not apply this term to that man, and should use neither the name nor the epithet as the common casual profanity they have become.

Eastern Religions

Asian religions present different problems than do Christianity and Islam. Eastern religious concepts often are so different from Western ones that calling them monotheistic or polytheistic clarifies little. Yet, generally, we can

say that although Eastern religions may posit a supreme unifying divinity without form, these religions are characterized by profuse polytheism and graphic idol worship. For instance, a Hindu temple is a home to idols of major and minor deities, whose worship may include sacrificial offerings of food, water, flowers, and incense. Idols may be bathed and dressed in fine clothes, erected so they can "see" worshipers, accept their offerings, and grant them blessings. How should Jews address such a religion and its adherents?

On one hand, the ethical power of Eastern religions is well known. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism teach non-violence and admirable ethics. Certainly they do not always agree with Judaism, nor are they always moral models, but they surely meet Meiri's standards of communities "governed by the ways of religion." By this ethical analysis, these religions are non-idolatrous. We should extend neighborly relations to them and join them in dialogues and communal projects.

At the same time, the beliefs and practices at the heart of many Eastern faiths are inimical to Judaism and are completely forbidden to Jews. We should consider such religions as non-idolatrous ethically, but as cultically idolatrous. The *halakhah* demands that Jews not enter a shrine where idols are worshiped, let alone participate in their worship. Nor may Jews lend such worship personal or communal financial support. It is forbidden to own idols associated with these faiths until a practitioner of the religion actively negates the idol's religious character and renders it unfit for worship. And it is inappropriate to provide Jewish communal space for such a group's worship. This judgment does not denigrate the spiritual or moral power of these religions. Hinduism, for example, imparts meaning and comfort to tens of millions of people. But Jews cannot walk that path and remain faithful to Judaism.

Numerous Jews today experiment with Buddhism. Many combine Eastern and Western elements into a new amalgam, calling themselves "Jewish-Buddhists" or "Ju-Bus." In the realm of theology, Buddhism is non-theistic, and so cannot be said to posit false or multiple gods. Buddha himself is not understood to be a god, but rather a person who attained enlightenment. In the realm of practice, Buddhism mandates no necessary violations of Jewish tradition. Therefore, to the extent that such theoretical standards are maintained, a Jew might practice Buddhist meditation, study its scriptures, and learn from its insights. However, practice can be quite different from theory, and Jews following this spiritual path must take this into account. In actual popular practice, especially in Asia but also in the West, Buddha and Bodhisattvas (enlightened sages on their way to Buddhahood) are regarded as divine beings—to the point at which statues of the Buddha are kept in shrines, formally and dramatically venerated during worship, showered with

gifts, and verbally thanked for the natural bounty of the world. Whatever elite Buddhist theology may be, we should apply a normative Jewish yardstick to Buddhism as it is actually practiced by its millions of adherents in the Buddhist temples of the world. Thus, Jews are forbidden from participating in any ritual, or from entering any shrine, in which idols are venerated. Jews who wish to study Buddhism should do so only in a setting free from images of the Buddha, and solely among those who maintain a strictly non-theistic approach.

The halakhic status of Eastern religions is discussed from an interesting vantage point by Rabbis Mayer Rabinowitz and Avram Reisner in their 2007 responsum regarding the practice of immersing new and used food utensils in a *mikveh* before use, which was approved by the CJLS and which is available for perusal by the public on the website of the Rabbinical Assembly.

Civil Religion

At Jeremiah 29:7, the prophet exhorts his listeners to "seek the peace of the city to which (God) exiled you; and pray to God on its behalf; for when it has peace, so shall you have peace." From this verse, Jews learn that civic well-being is our religious concern.

Cooperation and amity among religious communities is critical to a tolerant and open society. We should pray together with non-Jews for the polity we share; it would have been inconceivable, for example, for American Conservative Jews not to join interfaith services after the World Trade Center attacks. The *halakhah* encodes a related impulse when it prescribes that we should bless God upon seeing a gentile king ("Praised are You . . . who shares the glory of the Divine with all creatures") and eagerly pursue the opportunity to do so (*BT* B'rakhot 58a; cf. *SA* Oraḥ Ḥayyim 224:9). Indeed, Jews have been reciting prayers for their secular governments since at least the twelfth century, as attested by sources from Germany and Spain (see, e.g., *N'tiv Binah* [Tel Aviv: Sinai, 1968, vol. 2, pp. 233–234] of Rabbi Issachar Jacobson, citing Rabbi David Abudarham and the annals of the Jewish community of Worms). Since we pray for the government in our synagogues, it is equally proper to do so in ecumenical settings. Jews should be proud to give a benediction or religious reflection at a civic or interfaith meeting. And we should be proud of Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, who in January 2009 attended an ecumenical service in the National Cathedral in Washington, on the morning after Barack Obama's inauguration, although he was roundly condemned by his Orthodox colleagues for entering a church. Of course, we remain steadfast in our aniconic monotheism. Joining interfaith services should not in-

clude participating in non-Jewish rituals or entering into the seductive realm of communal idol worship. But in shared space, we and adherents of other religions may bring our traditions together to improve our common society.

Studying Together

Classical *halakhah* forbids Jews to study idolatry, lest we come to imitate it. But as noted above, Islam and Christianity are not formally to be labeled as idolatrous religions. Therefore, we may study these faiths and their sacred texts. Indeed, such study may even enhance our Judaism by providing us with interesting, even inspiring, comparisons and alternate views. Historical instances of such ecumenical borrowing and mutual influence fill libraries. And because of the extensive literary overlap in our scriptures, studying the Christian testament can particularly illuminate our understanding of early Judaism. The Talmud itself appears once to quote Christian scripture (*BT* Shabbat 116b, apparently citing Matthew 5:17).

With respect to Eastern religions, the question, again, is more complicated. The letter and spirit of the classical prohibition are clearly aimed at preventing Jews from exploring how idolaters worship and learning what they believe about their gods. On the other hand, to forbid such study would clash with contemporary pluralistic values and inculcate needless intolerance. Furthermore, to understand any one religion, it is helpful to see how other religions function in their own cultures. (An oft-repeated maxim in religious studies posits that if you know only one religion, you know none.) A solution for Conservative Jews might be formally to distinguish between academic study, in which learning conveys facts rather than values, and devotional study oriented toward religious growth. When the Torah forbade studying idolatry, there was no concept of the academic discipline of comparative religions, and it must have been assumed that one would only study other faiths' rituals or myths for spiritual enlightenment and inspiration. But in our day, academic study is quite different from devotional study. Insulated by the scientific method of the academy, it would be permitted for a Jew to study the worship of Kami spirits in Shintoism, for instance, but forbidden to seek to feel the devotion of Shinto adherents. Non-theistic Buddhism may be viewed in its own category. Since Buddhism—at least in theory—does not teach about spiritual powers contrasting with Jewish monotheism, one might turn to Buddhism for spiritual edification even beyond the academic mode in which one might study other religions. In principle, it should be permissible to mine Buddhist teaching of masters like Thich Nhat Hanh or the Dalai Lama for insights into human suffering, mindfulness, compassion, and spiritual liberation. But as the practice of Buddhism

often strays into idolatrous rites, observant Jews studying Buddhism must be ready to close their books when they encounter teachings about the alternative spirit world. For example, the well-known Tibetan Book of the Dead is full of accounts of the "deities" one encounters after death. This can be of no more than academic interest, not spiritual edification, for an observant Jew.

Turning to the opposite side of this coin: can one study Torah with non-Jews or teach it to them? The Talmud prohibits teaching Torah to gentiles, claiming that the Torah should be the exclusive patrimony of Israel (*BT* Ḥagigah 13a). But why should teaching others the Torah make it *less* the patrimony of Israel? Some propose that gentiles are excluded from Torah study because they will not practice the *mitzvot* they learn, which might suggest that their worth lies in contemplation alone instead of practice. (Of course, none of this applies to gentiles who are prospective converts to Judaism. They may be taught Torah without any restrictions, since they are on their way to adopting the commandments as their own.) Others say the prohibition applies only to the Oral Torah, but that Christians may study the written text of the Bible with us because they affirm its sanctity. Indeed, medieval rabbis did study Bible with Christians, as we see from Rashbam's comment to Exodus 20:13. Still others assume that non-Jews are excluded from Torah study because they may use what they learn against us in disputations—which was a serious problem for medieval Jews forced publicly to defend their faith in public debate.

Each of these reasons can have meaning for Jews today as we evaluate this restriction. In a religious or devotional setting, we should ask our non-Jewish study partners to approach the material with sympathy, with respect, with the possibility of commitment, and without polemical motive. When we are confident that some or all these conditions are met, it is at least appropriate—and perhaps even desirable—to study with non-Jews. Partly by sharing the Torah's inspiring teachings on ethics, for instance, we will forge links with non-Jews together to build God's dominion on earth. As proposed above, formal academic study should be measured by a different yardstick entirely. In a setting that stresses dispassion instead of commitment, a Jew need not refrain from studying any subject with non-Jews.

Intermarriage

Families transmit culture. Therefore, Judaism views in-marriage as critical to the preservation of the faith and has traditionally seen exogamy as tantamount to abandoning the Jewish people, as in this typical passage: "Do not marry them. Neither give your daughter to his son nor take his son for your

daughter, for they will turn your children away from Me, and [bring them to] worship other gods" (Deuteronomy 7:3–4).

This is not anti-gentile bigotry, as an outside observer might suppose, but a strategy for maximizing a family's commitment to its heritage and its religious culture. Ancient and modern evidence confirms that houses divided against themselves do not stand for long. When only some members are Jewish, families are unlikely to share rich Judaic lives. Of course, everybody who works in the Jewish world knows individuals who have managed to defy those trends, and who have maintained a strong commitment to Judaism despite being married to non-Jews. We must lovingly invite such families into our communities and not ignore them, but their example does not negate the overwhelming evidence that intermarriage correlates with weak Jewish commitment.

That is why classical *halakhah* forbids Jews from marrying non-Jews, and why we affirm this prohibition as integral to the future of the Jewish people. Some authorities regard this as a biblical prohibition and others see it as rabbinic legislation; all, however, affirm its validity. Rabbinical Assembly members will not officiate at intermarriages, nor may they even be present at the weddings of Jews and non-Jews. Furthermore, the sages of ancient times enacted a ban on sex with non-Jews (Maimonides, *MT* Hilkhot Issurei Bi·ah 12:1; *SA* Even Ha-eizer 16), a prohibition contemporary Jews should likewise affirm.

If a mixed couple marries by non-halakhic means, the marriage has no status in Jewish law. Children of their union take the status of the mother, however, so if she is Jewish then so are her babies. Most Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis accept the children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers as "patrilineal" Jews. The Conservative movement rejects this departure from the traditional laws of personal status that help the Jewish people define sacred membership and maintain its boundaries. Children of intermarriages are not illegitimate (i.e., they are not in the halakhic category of *mamzeirim*), since that status applies only to children born of a union subject to punishments of excision (called *kareit* in Hebrew) or death (*BT* Y'vamot 49a). Therefore, the offspring of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers are eligible to convert to Judaism. The Jewish parents of non-Jewish children are encouraged to convert them while young and fully raise and educate them as Jews.

The Conservative response to intermarriage derives as much from public policy as from the traditional "four cubits" of the *halakhah*. How precisely communities should relate to those have intermarried, how warmly they should welcome intermarried families, what roles are proper for non-Jewish parents at life-cycle celebrations—these are policy questions without unambiguous halakhic answers. Over the years, the Committee on Jewish Law and

Standards has considered various approaches, ranging from those their authors themselves label as being "harsh" to those their authors prefer to call "welcoming." Rabbi Seymour Siegel wisely counseled each rabbi and community to employ policies that will encourage conversion. His 1982 statement remains illuminating: "In light of individual differences and circumstances, we should leave it to the *mara de'atra* [the rabbi of a specific community] to decide what kind of action will likely lead to conversion of spouses and/or children. This should be the *halakhah* in this very difficult situation" (*CJLS Responsa 1980–1990,* p. 676).

The question of intermarriage is discussed elsewhere in this volume by Rabbi David Fine in his chapter on the *halakhah* of marriage and by Rabbis Daniel Nevins and David Greenstein in their chapters on the halakhic dimension of the relationship between parents and children and the *halakhah* of siblinghood, respectively.

When a Child Converts

Sometimes, sadly, interfaith relations must be negotiated within our own families. How should we react when a family member adopts another faith? Apostates may be bad Jews, but they can never be non-Jews. Jewishness is inalienable, for no one may quit the covenant between God and Israel. Rashi himself gave new halakhic meaning to an old aggadic expression when he said, "A sinning Israelite remains an Israelite" (see his comment in his collected responsa, ed. Israel Elfenbein [New York: Shulsinger, 1943], no. 173, pp. 193–194, and also cf. *BT* Sanhedrin 44a). Thus, even one who abandons Judaism—called in the traditional sources either a *m'shummad* (apostate) or a *mumar* (renegade)—remains halakhically Jewish in important ways. If, for example, a *mumar* were to contract a marriage with another Jew, for instance, that marriage would be valid (*SA* Even Ha-eizer 44:9). Indeed, the persistence of Jewish identity is intended to remind apostates that the door is ever open for their return. If apostates do rejoin the Jewish people, immersion in a *mikveh* is not strictly required, since their Jewishness has never fully lapsed. Most authorities, however, agree immersion would be an appropriate gesture of renewed commitment (see the gloss of the Rema to *SA* Yoreh Dei·ah 268:12).

What about the children of apostates who come from Jewish ancestry but were raised outside of Judaism, and now wish to return to the religion of their ancestors? The CJLS holds that we should base our response toward these "second-generation apostates" to the level of their earlier non-Jewish commitment. Rabbi Gerald Zelizer's 1995 responsum on this theme argues that indi-

viduals of halakhically Jewish descent who were actually raised in another religion should be required to undergo formal immersion and be interviewed by a *beit din* (*CJLS Responsa 1991–2000,* pp. 146–150). If such a male individual were uncircumcised, that too would be required, as would the symbolic act of *hattafat dam b'rit* (drawing a drop of blood from the penis) if he had been medically but not ritually circumcised as an infant. For the child of apostate Jewish parents who was not formally a church member, however, rabbis should be "creative and flexible" to devise a proper method for that person to renounce any other religious affiliation and to embrace Judaism. Such acts might include immersion, but could also include a verbal declaration. Furthermore, he wrote, such leniency would be effective in enticing them to return to Judaism.

On the other hand, tradition calls for distinct social and ritual sanctions against apostates. For example, in ancient times, an apostate was not permitted to offer a Temple sacrifice, even though a gentile actually had this right (*BT* Ḥullin 5a). Nor may a *mumar* write a Torah scroll or circumcise a baby. The idea behind such restrictions is that, although apostates may still be Jews in a technical sense, still commanding some loyalty from the community, they cannot join us in practicing Judaism until they renounce alien faiths. Applying this approach to contemporary life, Jews professing other faiths—including those affiliated with Christian groups like "Jews for Jesus" who insist that they are still practicing Judaism—should be excluded from Jewish religious life. They should not be counted in a *minyan,* nor may they be offered public ritual honors or roles, or serve as agents for other Jews doing *mitzvot.* Should they repent and rejoin our people, however, they may resume these roles. Authorities differed on whether or how to readmit the returning apostate, as is evident from the ruling of Rabbi Joseph Karo (in the *Shulḥan Arukh* at *SA* Oraḥ Ḥayyim 128:37) that "an apostate must not raise his hands [to pronounce the priestly blessing], but some say that if he repents he may." The Rema resolved this uncertainty, commenting on the latter clause, "And this is the correct view." This ruling should guide us today.

There is a folk practice of observing mourning rites for a child who abandons Judaism for another faith. This may be based on a misinterpretation of a report about the medieval Rabbi Gershom of Mainz, called the Light of the Exile, who observed two weeks of mourning when his apostate son died, grieving both for the loss of his life in this world and for his forfeit of eternal life as well (see the tale as told in the *Hagahot Asheiri* to *BT* Mo·eid Katan 3:59, 38c in the standard pagination). But in this story, Rabbi Gershom's son had actually died; therefore, the report cannot imply that one should mourn for a living person. One should not follow this perverse custom, which gives up on a person by denying that repentance could change his or her future.

The question of how parents might deal with children who abandon Judaism is also discussed above by Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins.

Speaking to the Dead

The Bible and the sages explicitly forbid witchcraft and necromancy, and condemn many other occult traditions as "Amorite [pagan] ways." For instance, the biblical King Saul's downfall and death are ensured when he consults a medium, the "*ba·alat ov* of En-Dor," to summon the spirit of the deceased prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 28). Imitating King Saul by employing a contemporary medium remains tantamount to *avodah zarah*. Although the Talmud and Jewish lore record numerous cases where people communicated with the dead, the *halakhah* today generally forbids such practices. Maimonides, ruling particularly strictly, forbids any attempt to raise the dead to learn some piece of information from them (*MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 11:13). Mediums in our day might use different methods than ancient ones did, but the intent is the same. The *halakhah* forbids seeking occult knowledge through the use of spirit mediums.

Astrology poses interesting challenges. Both talmudic authorities (those cited at *BT* Bava Batra 16b) and medieval ones (most prominently Ibn Ezra, in his "long commentary" to Exodus 23:25) assumed the pattern of stars in the sky affected the governance of the world. Dissenting, Maimonides regarded astrology as *avodah zarah* and forbade any attempt to read the future, by whatever means (*MT* Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim 11:6–9). Even listening to such "fraudulent tales and lies" is forbidden, and acting on a seer's advice would be worse. All this magic is for "witless fools," Maimonides says (ibid., 11:16). For philosophical and scientific reasons contemporary Jews should follow his judgment. Astrology enshrines superstition over rationality and derides the power of human free will, a basic premise of Judaism. Modern Conservative Jews should not practice astrology.

Interfaith and Faith

"A people that dwells alone, not reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9). So said the gentile prophet Balaam, watching our ancestors camped in the wilderness. But contemporary Conservative Jews know that this is no longer true, if it ever was. As this chapter has explained, modern Jews must negotiate encounters with other mono-, poly- and non-theistic religions, figuring out what we can and cannot share with our neighbors. To do this successfully, we should do so within the *halakhot* that impart Jewish integrity to our actions.

In contrast to this approach, however, the leading twentieth-century modern Orthodox thinker, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, believed cooperation over matters of faith and religious teaching was impossible. Jews should cooperate with gentiles only on civic and secular matters, Rabbi Soloveitchik believed, but he forbade interreligious dialogue, as he wrote in one of his major English essays, "Confrontation" (*Tradition* 6:2 [1964], pp. 55–80). Nearly fifty years later, this position prevails among American Orthodox rabbis. Genuine encounter would imply openness to others' truth claims, Rabbi Soloveitchik said, but religious believers must be resolute about their own faith and impervious to counter-claims. Discussing theology with adherents of other faiths, he said, would signal that we Jews would be willing to modify our religious views for the sake of winning friends and making peace.

I ultimately reject Rabbi Soloveitchik's objections, but I hope I do not dismiss them lightly. I hope Jews participate in interreligious encounters that refine, advance, and deepen our faith, not undermine it. Our most central commitments are not on the table. And as we do not enter religious dialogue to win converts, neither can we homogenize our faith commitments in the name of a Judeo-Christian "common ground."

Conservative Jews should draw inspiration from the many others who reject Soloveitchik's model of interreligious encounter as necessarily ending in disputation. Notably, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was Soloveitchik's disputant in those days, taking part in discussions of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Indeed, "Confrontation" was originally given as a speech at the 1964 Rabbinical Council of America convention, largely in response to the ecumenical overtures of Vatican II.

We should follow Heschel and others, like the philosophers and halakhists Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff of our Conservative movement and Rabbi David Novak (trained Conservative, now neo-Orthodox), who do not regard interreligious encounter as a trap of inevitable syncretism. We need not narrow ourselves hastily, nor poison ourselves by demonizing others. And interreligious dialogue need not consist of one side seducing the other away from its faith. There are powerful social benefits, according to Novak, when religious Jews become partners with religious Christians to propound common religious values in an increasingly secular world. (See Novak's *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1989].) For Dorff, there are epistemological and theological reasons for dialogue with others who may have worked out different parts of the puzzle of living in God's world. (See Dorff's *To Do the Right and the Good* [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2002], ch. 3.) Since no mortal human being can possess ultimate truth, and since the Eternal is God of all people and

cultures, it may be that God desires religious diversity. Judaism is the best religion *for us,* Dorff holds, but perhaps God brought us all together in a rich, textured world so that we would learn from each other.

As Heschel wrote, deep interfaith encounters seek "neither to flatter nor to refute one another, but to help one another; to share insight and learning . . . to search in the wilderness for the well-springs of devotion, for the power of love and care for man" ("No Religion Is an Island," *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity,* ed. Fritz Rothschild [New York: Crossroad, 1990], pp. 309–324). May we be fortunate to experience interfaith encounters that nurture our religious lives as Jews. May we greet others with openness and respect, but also with faith, unshakably loyal to our sacred tradition, loving God and loving all God's children.