

Faiths in Conversation, May 1, 2013  
Temple Shalom

Why interfaith Dialogue?  
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**Six Reasons for Interfaith Dialogue**

1. To broaden, deepen, and refine my understanding of God and Judaism
  - a. By having to articulate my own conception and Judaism and make it clear to outsider
  - b. By having to grapple with and respond to intellectual and moral challenges to Judaism from without
  - c. By exposure to brand-new ideas, interpretations and experiences that can help my Judaism grow
  - d. *\*Many within Judaism, especially among the Modern Orthodox and the Ultra-Orthodox, would disagree and would see a danger of dilution and syncretism*
2. To expand my perspective of truth and of God
  - a. To learn to see God in all the world
  - b. To experience the truth that is found in other religions
  - c. To learn to experience the imagine of God in other people
3. To spread my understanding of Judaism among peoples of different faiths in order to enrich the world
  - a. Judaism does not believe that our religious way of life needs to be adopted by others in order for them to reach human fulfillment, but we do believe that we have insights that can be beneficial to others
  - b. All of Judaism should be made known to the world
  - c. *\*Historically, the majority position however, among Jewish sources and thinkers, is that only a small portion of Judaism should be disseminated to the world. Today, that majority position still holds sway in just about all of the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community and among many in the Modern Orthodox community*
4. To bring people of different religions together in mutual understanding and respect, to break down prejudice and stereotypes, to share and promote common moral truths, in order to create peace among religions and people
  - a. Life, human flourishing and peace are ultimate values for which we must do much, and religious leaders must do even more
  - b. Religion is a powerful force in global events, much more than secular politicians often admit. There can be no peace among nations and peoples until there is peace between religions, and there can be no peace between religions without dialogue
  - c. The work to be done is both internal – overcoming our own prejudice and fear of the other – and external - combatting anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism
  - d. *\*Parts of Jewish tradition provide a basis for seeing conflict among the religions as built into the fabric of Jewish fate, meaning that Christians and Muslims will always hate Jews, whether overtly or covertly. Christians will always try to convert us and Muslims will always want to kill us. Dialogue is therefore at the best worthless. Further, it is dangerous because it provides cover for our enemies.*

5. To show Islam a model of steadfast adherence to religious tradition while integrating into modernity and democracy
6. To reach and to inspire those Jews who are not attracted to purely Jewish frameworks

### Traditional Jewish Sources

#### Reasons numbers one and two

##### **Rabbi Yehudah Levai ben Betzalel, Maharal of Prague, Baer haGolah, chapter 7**

*16th-century, Prague*

It is proper, out of love of reason and knowledge, that you do not [summarily] reject anything that opposes your own idea, especially so if [your adversary] does not intend merely to provoke you, but rather to declare his beliefs... And even if such beliefs are opposed to your own faith and religion, do not say to him, "Speak not and keep your words." Because if so, there will be no clarification of religion. Just the opposite, tell him to speak his mind and all that he wants to say so that he will not be able to claim that you silenced him. Anyone who prevents another from speaking only reveals the weakness of his own religion, and not as many think, that by avoiding discussion about religion you strengthen it. This is not so! Rather, the denial [of the right to speak] of one who opposes your religion is the negation and weakening of that religion... For the proper way to attain truth is to hear [others'] arguments which they hold sincerely, not out of a desire to provoke you. Thus it is wrong simply to reject an opponent's ideas; instead, draw him close to you and delve into his words.

##### **Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, Sefat Emet, Leviticus, chapter 28, verse 12, year 5655 (The Language of Truth, Art Green, pages 205 – 206) 19<sup>th</sup> century, Poland**

The midrash quotes the verse: "Death and life are in the hands of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). It goes on to quote Ben Sira, who told of one who found a glowing ember and blew upon it, lighting up a flame. Then he spat on it and it was extinguished.

This ember is to be found everywhere; it is the spark of Torah which is called fire. The word ember is numerically equivalent to the word truth. Truth refers to Torah, by which everything was created. Thus the ember is to be found everywhere, in everything.

The Jew is capable of fulfilling the potential of this spark. ... This means making a real effort to find words of Torah everywhere, to seek out the stamp and imprint of Torah that is found in every place ...

**Rav Avraham Yitzchak haCohen Kook, “Concerning the Conflict of Opinions and Beliefs”, Orot, page 130 (The Classics of Western Spirituality – Abraham Isaac Kook, Ben Zion Bokser, page 272) Early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Israel**

The higher comprehensiveness ... – it includes all within it – cannot by nature exclude anything from its domain; it finds a place for everything. In doing so it only increases our perception of the light in all lifestyles and in all expressions of the spirit. The basic thrust of its kind of tolerance is to find a place for every form of illumination, of life, and of spiritual expression.

It knows that there is a spark of light in everything and that the divine spark of light shines in all the various belief systems, as so many different pedagogics for the culture of humanity, to improve the spiritual and material existence, the present and the future of the individual and of society.

But they exist on different levels. Just as there is only one force of germination, and it is manifest in the cedars of Lebanon as well as in the moss on the wall, except that in the first instance it appears in a rich and more fully developed form and in the second instance in a poor and limited form, so also does the spark of divine light appear in the more advanced belief systems in a form that is rich and exalted, while in the less advanced belief systems in a form that is muddled, poor and lowly ...

Therefore, instead of rejecting every pattern of ideas from which the tiny elements of good have begun to sparkle ... - a task which is bound to fail, it is for us to enhance the original light. It is for us to discover the breadth and the depth, the comprehensiveness and the eternity that is immanent in the light of the faith of Israel. It is for us to clarify how every spark of the good that is manifest in the world stems from its source and is linked with in a natural bond. Then will all the sparks newly made manifest and light and life to the soul of the people mighty in its spiritual vitality, in its divine potency... This type of tolerance is bound to spread so that the human spirit will be able to find the divine spark hidden in everything, and to automatically discard every dross...

**Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak haCohen Kook, Arpelei Tohar, page 33**  
*Early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Israel*

And how can man grow towards an appreciation of the greatness of the Divine, such that the understanding of the authentic form of the grandeur of the soul will not be blurred but will rather be expanded through the expansion of the strength of its field of its knowledge? - Through the liberation of its imagination and of the expanse of its thought, through knowledge of the world and of life, through the wealth of the experience of all of existence. For this it is necessary to study all the wisdoms in the world, all ways of life, all different cultures, along with the ethical systems and religions of all nations and languages, so that, with greatness of soul, one will know how to purify them all. And clearly, the whole foundation of one's understanding as a Jew will be built upon the foundation of the Torah in its complete and utter expansiveness, and one should always strive that his path will not be contracted and his mindset will not be limited and fragmented ...

**Reason number three**

**Hebrew Scripture, Book of Genesis, chapter 12, verse 3**

All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.

**Hebrew Scripture, Book of Exodus, chapter 19, verse 6**

You shall all be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

**Hebrew Scripture, book of Deuteronomy, chapter 4, verse 6**

Learn and observe [the Torah] for it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, who will hear of all these laws and proclaim that this is truly a great, wise and understanding nation.

**Hebrew Scripture, Book of Isaiah, chapter 49, verse 6**

I will also make you a light unto the nations.

**Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabat, page 88b** *Babylonia, 3<sup>rd</sup> century*

Rebbi Yohanan said: What is meant by the verse, 'The Lord giveth the word: They that publish the tidings are a great host'? (Psalms 68:12) — Every single word that went forth from the Omnipotent was split up into seventy languages. The School of Rebbi Yishmael taught: 'And like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces.' (Jeremiah 23:29) Just as a hammer blow creates many sparks, so every single word that went forth from the Holy One, blessed be He, split up into seventy languages.

**Reason number four**

**Rav Avraham Yitzchak haCohen Kook, Olat Ra'aya, volume one, page 330**

*Early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Israel*

Said Rebbi Elazar in the name of Rebbe Haninah: Torah scholars increase peace in the world, as the verse says – "All your sons shall be learned of God, and of abundant peace are your sons". (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot, page 64a)

There are those who mistakenly think that world peace will be built through agreement in positions and opinions. Therefore, when they see Torah scholars investigating and delving into the wisdom of the Torah, and through their investigation more and more possibilities are brought up, they think that this is a source of controversy and the opposite of peace. But such is not the case, for it is impossible for true peace to come to the world except through the

abundance of peace. The abundance of peace means that all sides and opinions will become evident, and it will become clear how there is room for all of them, each according to its own standing, place, and substance. On the contrary, even matters that appear superfluous or contradictory will become evident when the truth of wisdom in all its facets is revealed. For only through an assemblage of all the parts and all the particulars, all the dissimilar ideas and all the diverse disciplines – only through them will the light of truth and justice shine, as well as knowledge of God, love and awe of Him, and the true light of Torah. That is what is meant by the statement that Torah scholars increase peace, for in that they expand and explain and give birth to new expressions of wisdom from varied perspectives with an abundance of differences, in this they increase peace, as the verse says “All your sons shall be learned of God”, for all will recognize that even the approaches and understandings that appear to be in opposition one to the other, all of them are part of God’s learning, and through each one of them will be revealed a perspective on knowledge of God and the light of His truth ... A building is constructed out of different parts, and the truth of the light of the world will be constructed out of the different sides and different opinions. For they are all words of the living God, different modes of service, and guidance, and education, each one taking its place and station. And we must not abandon any talent or ability, but rather we must expand it and find its proper place. When a contradiction appears between ideas, this is how wisdom will be built. One must reflect upon how to find the internal logic of the ideas, which will bring about a reconciliation and an end to the contradiction. The abundance of ideas that results from the differences between people and the different educations they received, that is what enriches wisdom and expands it. Ultimately everything will be established properly and it will be recognized that the complete structure cannot be built except through the confluence of all the influences that appeared to be in conflict. ... Therefore this is the blessing of true peace that comes forth out of strength. God will bless his people with peace, and the blessing of peace that comes with strength is the peace of the unification of all the opposites. But first the opposites must be found, in order that there be someone to labor and something to unite, and then the blessing will become apparent, through the truth of “These and those are the words of the living God”. That is why peace is one of the names of the Holy One, blessed be He, for He is the master of all of the different truths, and He contains them all and combines them all together. Let His great name be blessed throughout the world.

**Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, Orot Hakodesh II, pp. 242-43, “Limiting Goodness with Goodness”**

Those who have great souls cannot be separated from the most encompassing inclusiveness. All of their desire and ideal is, constantly, the good of the entire universe in its full breadth, height and depth. ...

The love of all existence fills the heart of those who are good: the pious among all creatures and among humanity. They look forward to the happiness of all. They hope for the light and joy of all. They draw the love of all existence—which contains the full spectrum of the multiplicity of its creations—from the supernal love of God, from the love of the total and complete perfection of God, Who is the Cause of all, Who brings all into being and gives life to all. ...

When they come to the strata of mankind and find factions of nations, religions, sects and opposing ideals, they strive with all their strength to encompass all of it, to connect and to unify. With the healthy spiritual sense of their pure soul, which rises and flies to the Godly heights above all constrictions, they recognize that all details must be full, that the best societal forms must be elevated and must enter with all the satisfaction of their details into the light of a perfected life. They desire that every detail will be guarded and elevated, and the complete entirety united and filled with peace.