

מזכירות
 כ"ק אדמו"ר מנחם מענדל שליט"א שניאורסאהן
 ליובאוויטש

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Excerpt from a letter by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson - written in response to an inquiry by the head of a group of Jewish spiritual leaders - on the subject of "interfaith dialogue".

By the Grace of G-d

...In reply to your question as to what should be the Jewish attitude towards the matter of "religious dialogue" which has been advocated in certain Jewish and non-Jewish circles.

It surprises me that you should have any doubt in this matter. For, anyone with some knowledge of Jewish history knows with what reluctance Jews viewed religious debates with non-Jews. There were many good reasons for this attitude, in addition to the basic reason that Jews do not consider it their mission to convert gentiles to their faith, nor do they wish to expose themselves to the missionary zeal of other faiths.

Each and every generation has its own characteristics which have a bearing on contemporary problems. One of the peculiarities of our own day and age - a circumstance which makes such "dialogue" even more reprehensible - is the confusion and perplexity which are so widespread now, especially among the younger generation. Symptomatic of this confusion is the lowering, or even toppling, of the once well-defined boundaries in various areas of the daily life. This process, which began with the lowering, or abolishing altogether, of the Mechitzah in the synagogue, has extended itself also to the abolishing of boundaries in the areas of ethics, morality, and even common decency. In some quarters it has even led to a perversion of values, reminiscent of the lament of the prophet: "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20).

One can hardly blame the young generation for their confusion and perplexity, considering the upheavals, revolutions and wars which have plagued our times, and the bankruptcies of the various systems and ideologies to which the young generation has pinned its hopes for a better world. Moreover, many of those who should have been the teachers and guides of the younger generation, have compounded the confusion and misdirection, for various reasons which need not be elaborated here.

One of the consequences of the said state of affairs is also the misconception prevailing in some quarters regarding the so-called "interfaith" movement. The "brotherhood of mankind" is a positive concept only so long as it is confined to such areas as commerce, philanthropy, and various civil and economic aspects of the society, wherein peoples of various faiths and minority groups must live together in harmony, mutual respect and dignity. Unfortunately, the concept of "brotherhood" has been misconstrued to require members of one faith to explain their religious beliefs and practices to members of another faith, and in return to receive instruction in the religion of others. Far from clarifying matters, these inter-faith activities have, at best, added to the confusion, and, at worst, have been used with missionary zeal by those religions which are committed to proselytizing members of other faiths.

The alarmingly growing rate of intermarriage has a variety of underlying causes. But there can be no doubt that one of the factors is the interfaith movement, or "dialogue" (which is a euphemism for the same), wherein clergymen of one faith are invited to preach from the pulpit of another. It is easy to see what effect this has on the minds of the young, as well as of their parents, whose commitments to their own faith are in any case near the vanishing point.

This in itself offers a complete justification for the prohibition which the Torah imposes upon the study of other faiths - if, indeed, external justification were necessary. Only in exceptional cases does the Torah permit the study of other religions, and that also only to specially qualified persons. Bitter experience has made it abundantly clear how harmful any such interfaith or dialogue is. Thus, even those Jews to whom the Torah is not yet, unfortunately, their Pillar of Light to illuminate their life, but who still wish to preserve their Jewish identity and, especially, the Jewish identity of their children - even they should clearly see the dangers of intermarriage and complete assimilation, G-d forbid, lurking behind these so-called "dialogues," and should reject them in no uncertain terms.

While we must not give up a single Jewish soul which happens to be in danger of straying from the path of Torah and Mitzvot, and certainly in danger of intermarriage, or assimilation, G-d forbid, and we must spare no effort in trying to save that Jew or Jewess, even if it involves a lengthy "dialogue" with him or her, we must just as resolutely reject any such dialogue with a non-Jew, for the reasons mentioned, and also because we have no interest in his conversion to our faith.

To be sure, we have obligations to our society at large. We must contribute our share to the common weal, help to maintain and raise the standards of morality and ethics, and to encourage the non-Jew to observe the "Seven Precepts of the Children of Noah" in all their ramifications. But to accomplish these objectives, there is no need for us whatever to have any religious dialogues with non-Jews, nor any interfaith activities in the form of religious discussions, interchange of pulpits, and the like.

Finally, I wish to stress the following points: -

(1) In most polemics, debates, dialogues and the like, the usual outcome is not a rapprochement of minds and hearts; rather do they evoke an impulse of rivalry and the desire to score a point, or gain a victory over the opponent by any means. This is usually the case even in non-religious polemics, and certainly very much so in religious debates, inasmuch as the subject matter touches one's inner soul; and even more so where religious zealots are concerned.

Hence, if the purpose of the "dialogue" is a rapprochement, it is doomed from the start, and often even brings the opposite results.

(2) Where one party to the dialogue is committed to proselytizing, and the other is not, it is clear that the dialogue will be used by the first to accomplish its purpose, and the "dialogue" will in effect become a "monologue".

(3) Looking at the question from a practical standpoint, perhaps the most important point is that the effort expended on such "dialogues" is, to say the least, a waste we can ill afford. For, every individual has only limited resources of time, energy, and influence, while every right-thinking person must feel a sense of responsibility to accomplish something in behalf of the community in which he lives. Experience has shown that the benefits, if any, from all such "dialogues" in terms of a better understanding among men of different faiths and races, have been hardly discernable. But certain it is that the energies thus expended have been at the expense of vital areas of Yiddishkeit, where there is a crying need for strengthening the Jewish faith and practices within our own ranks, especially among the younger generation.

There are, of course, some well-meaning, but misguided individuals, who see in interfaith and dialogue an avenue of lofty goals and ideals deserving of their utmost efforts. But there are also those who encourage them in their misconceptions, thus abetting the misdirection and misplacement of energies and resources, sorely needed elsewhere, namely, and to repeat, in the spreading among our youths, a deeper knowledge of the Torah, Torath Chayim, which, as the name indicates, is the true guide in the daily life of the Jew, at all times, and in all places. For the Torah's truths are eternal, having been given by the Eternal, the Creator of man, and the Master and Ruler of the World, at all times and all places. It is a tragic irony, that precisely in this day and age, and in this country, where we have been blessed with freedom of worship, and do not face persecution and constant peril for every observance as in certain less fortunate countries, yet so many of our younger generation are lost to us daily by the default, negligence and misdirection of the leaders who should know better.

It is high time to replace interfaith with inner-faith, and concentrate on dialogue with our own misguided youth, as well as - to our shame - with the adults, so as to fan their slumbering embers of faith and to illuminate their lives with the Pillar of Light and the Pillar of Fire of the Torah.

With blessing,

signed: /Menachem Schneerson/

P.S. In order to bring my reply in fuller accord with the details of your question, the above has been couched in terms that would be fitting for a person who is not committed to the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law). However, from the viewpoint of the Jew to whom the Torah is indeed "a lamp unto his feet," the true guide and illumination in his daily life, the decisive reason for the outright rejection of religious dialogue is the prohibition imposed by the Torah against the study of other religions, except in very specific cases and by specially qualified individuals, as already mentioned.

In this connection I wish to clarify one more point. It is sometimes argued that the rejection of religious dialogue, or the prohibition of the study of other religions, indicates an acknowledgment of weakness, G-d forbid, on the part of the Torah vis-avis other religions. There is no need to refute this fallacious argument. However, if a weakness is involved, it is that of human nature. In the face of a promise of an easier way of life, free from the restrictions of 248 positive and 365 negative precepts, and more freedom to gratify one's lower instincts, many an individual may succumb to the temptation. Moreover, the human mind is often so inconstant that one may readily overlook the most glaring and evident truths that bar the way to the gratification of one's lusts.

Besides, in any dialogue or debate, the victory often goes not to the proponent of the truth, but to the one who is more skilled in dialectic and oratory. By sheer rhetoric, by the gift of eloquence, one may even succeed in calling "evil good and darkness light" to which reference has been made in the beginning of this letter.

Thus, from whatever viewpoint you consider the matter, religious dialogue with non-Jews has no place in Jewish life, least of all here and now.