



FROM MONOLOGUES TO POSSIBLE DIALOGUE

Judaism's Attitude towards Christianity According to the Philosophy
of R. Yéhouda Léon Askénazi (Manitou)¹

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INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Yéhouda Léon Askénazi (familiarily known as Manitou, 1922–1996), born in Oran (Algeria), was renowned as an original thinker and attracted large audiences in Algeria, France, and Israel. His unique Kabbalistic and philosophical outlook contributed decisively to the formation of religious Zionism and served as a source of inspiration for mass immigration of French-speaking Jews to Israel. His numerous followers were educated according to the central theme of his Engenderment Theory, declaring that the original Hebrew identity was replaced by Jewish identity in the diaspora and then became the Israeli identity that is none other than a national manifestation of the original Hebrew identity.

The philosophy of R. Askénazi² exhibits an overtly historiocentric approach, touching on the universal-human, national, and individual historic ethos alike. 'Engenderment Theory' (*Mishnat Hatoladot*, see Charvit 2002, 105–108), the leitmotif of his outlook, sketches a cultural portrait of all identities comprising the human race, focusing on the family of nations and particularly on the family of Abraham, from which originated not only the identity of Israel but also its rival identities of Edom and Ishmael, i.e. Christian and Muslim cultures. Islam and Christianity occupy a prominent place in R. Askénazi's philosophy because of their competition with Judaism as a religion and the struggle of cultural identities for primacy. Askénazi's approach to history consists of a 'typological' use of biblical characters, applying them on actual groups and conflicts.

¹ This research was facilitated by a grant from IHEL Foundation.

² For his life story, see: Charvit 2001, 78–83; Charvit 2002, 105–108.





Islam and Christianity occupy a prominent place in R. Askénazi's philosophy because of the competition they pose for Judaism as a religion and the Jewish People as a nation: among the seventy nations, the Christians and Muslims did not cease struggling against Israel for primacy. Most world nations recognized the authority of Israel to be 'the High Priest of Mankind',³ *but the incitement emanating from Ishmael, Esau, and Aram interfered with Israel's bearing leadership of the sanctity of the human race.*⁴

R. Askénazi considered interfaith dialogue essential and significant, as it reinforces common monotheistic features, i.e. belief in one God and in revelation. He maintained that monotheism is based on the assumption that Jewish history may not be separated from general human history. He conducted a thorough examination of reciprocal relations among religions, concentrating on the effects of interaction and the Jewish People's sense of responsibility and mission towards humanity. In July 1990, R. Askénazi was invited to represent the Jewish faith on the establishment of the *Temple de l'Universel* in Paris, founded by the head of the Sufi order. Representatives of all world religions attended: Hindus, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Christians, Muslims, and Jews. He composed this prayer:

Our Father, Existence of all existence, Creator of the universe, Master of the world, Builder of our homes on the land in which Thy Presence was revealed in the past, Thy children have built this Universal Temple in fulfillment of the commandment 'And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them' [Exodus 25:8]. Heaven and earth are filled with Thy voice, yet from the beginning, the echo of Thy glory has distanced itself to accord time and purpose to existence. Return! May Thy absence cease! May it be Thy will that our unity augment Thy truth, as the Prophet Isaiah declared: 'for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples' [Isaiah 56:7]. (Askénazi 2005, 608–609)

³ as R. Elie Benamozeg of Livorno noted (Benamozeg 1961).

⁴ emphasis mine; R. Askénazi indicates that the author of the *Torah Temimah*, Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein, in explaining the verse 'And he said: The Lord came from Sinai, and rose from Seir unto them; He shined forth from Mount Paran, and He came from the myriads holy ...' [Deuteronomy 33:2], notes that Aramaic, Latin and Arabic competed with the Holy Tongue as the vehicle bearing the sanctity of prophecy: 'Perhaps he so reasoned because the word *veata* [and He came] is essentially Aramaic rather than Hebrew. On this foundation, the *Sifri* posited that when God revealed Himself to give the Torah to Israel, His revelation took place in not one but four languages: "And he said: The Lord came from Sinai" (Hebrew), "and rose from Seir unto them" (Latin), "He shined forth from Mount Paran" (Arabic), and "He came from the myriads holy" (Aramaic).' (lecture on the weekly Torah reading *Balak* [Numbers 22:2—25:9]).





This study examines the reciprocal relations that Christianity maintained with Israel during periods of Jewish Exile and Redemption alike, as reflected in R. Askénazi's historiosophic approach. R. Askénazi clarifies repeatedly that the conflict that was so clear and consistent throughout the years of exile may well be solved and settled some time in the future. R. Askénazi, as an educator and intellectual involved in the Israeli ethos, sought to explain the essence of the tension, rivalry, and hostility between the State of Israel and Jewish People and Europe and the United States, seeking to uncover their cultural and theological roots. He claimed that political struggles, arguments, delegitimization of Israel, conflicts, and ambivalent diplomacy all reflect the basic and fundamental views of those respective cultures.

CHRONICLES: CHRISTIANITY AND THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Founding Myths

My teacher Jacob Gordin told us something that surprised me greatly at the time. Eventually, however, I began to realize how right he was: The rivalry between Ishmael and Israel is more intense than the one between Christianity and Judaism, as Christian anti-Semitism prevailed in the Jewish Diaspora, whereas Muslim hatred accompanied the return of Israel to Zion—a far more serious development. (Manitou 2003)

These remarks open R. Askénazi's lecture entitled 'The Drama of Exile: The Edomite and Ishmaelite Exiles'. He suggests that Gordin's claim originates in the book *Shaarei Ora*, whose author, Spanish Kabbalist R. Yosef Gikatilla (1248–1325, a disciple of R. Avraham Aboulafia) maintains that the conflict with Ishmael is incorporated within the Edomite exile.⁵

⁵ This theory conforms with the Maharal's claim that Ishmael is not included among the Four Kingdoms (Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Edom) (*Nezah Israel* 21, 108; *Ner Mizva*, 18). 'According to the Talmud, Tractate *Avoda Zara* 2b, when the Fourth Kingdom faces final judgment, two voices will be heard—that of Edom/Rome ("We introduced many markets, many bathhouses, much silver and gold") and that of Persia/Islam ("We built many bridges, we conquered many cities, we fought many wars"). Ishmael's universalism accords it character appropriate to the Four Kingdoms. Islam perceives itself as a fundamental restoration of the world's religions from the time of Abraham to Muhammad, the Seal of Prophecy' (L.Y. Askénazi, lecture); 'The thaw in relations between the Jews and Islam was enabled by Christian theologians, as Islam's anti-Jewish stance ultimately originates in Christianity' (Askénazi 2005, 602).





‘Jacob remains Jacob; Esau remains Esau. A Jew remains a Jew despite all camouflage, and a heathen remains a heathen despite all Christian catechisms.’ (Askénazi 1999, 435). R. Askénazi unequivocally adopts the traditional Jewish view that Christianity is *idolatry*⁶ for all intents and purposes. In fact, the theological problem of Christianity is fundamentally a dual issue concerning the divinity of Jesus and his identification with the Messiah, that is, the embodiment of the Trinity and messianic fulfillment. In practical terms, however, the rivalry between Christianity and Judaism essentially centers on the former’s claim to represent the ‘true Israel’ (*Verus Israel*).⁷ Christianity’s denial of Israel and its historical validity since the destruction of the Second Temple and the birth of early Christianity is a reflection of its biased reading of the New Testament, an interpretation that underscores the founding myths of the Christian *credo*.

One key myth concerns Jesus’s family tree. The Gospel according to Matthew (1:17) declares Jesus to be a scion of the House of David, emphasizing that there were fourteen generations between Abraham and David, another fourteen from David until the Babylonian Captivity and another fourteen from then until the time of Jesus. In R. Askénazi’s interpretation:

There are three fourteen-generation periods from Abraham until the formative myth of Christian consciousness. This division of time into fourteen-generation segments originates in the Midrash: Throughout history, Israel measures time according to the phases of the moon. The fourteenth day is the day of the full moon. The Jewish Midrash is thus indeed the source of the verse in Matthew. (Askénazi 2000, 18)

The first group of fourteen generations notes that Abraham begat Isaac, Isaac begat Jacob, and Jacob begat ‘Judah and his brethren’:

⁶ From a Halachic point of view, despite the influence of pagan elements (e.g. belief in the Trinity, that conflicts with faith in the unity of God, as well as the abundance of statues, icons and crucifixes), Christianity is not considered the same as ancient idol worship. Even the Talmud displays initial signs of moderation when discussing whether Christianity is an idolatrous religion, leading religious authorities of the Middle Ages (*Responsa of Rabbeinu Gershom*, 21; Rashbam [R. Shmuel Ben-Meir], citing Rashi, quoted by R. Yaakov Ben-Asher in the *Tur*, Section 148) and the early Modern Era (R. Yosef Karo, *Shulhan Arukh*, Section 12) to posit that Christianity is essentially not idolatry, as Christians are observing the customs of their ancestors. In other words, Christian rites are no more than customs handed down from one generation to another, none of whose practitioners are well-versed in the nuances of ancient idolatry (Halevi, 1989, 65–66; Halevi, 1983, 239–241).

⁷ ‘Babylonia, Persia, and Greece never purported to replace Israel; only Edom presumed to be Israel’ (Manitou 2003); see Isaac 1959.





The biblical expression 'Joseph and his brethren' would have been expected, but Matthew replaces it with 'Judah and his brethren'. The reading of this key sentence deciphers the issue under consideration. In the Talmud and the Midrash, the phrase 'Judah and his brethren' embodies Judaism itself, meaning that the chief dynasty originating among the ancient Hebrews consists of Judah and his brethren. (ibid.; see I Chr 2:3–4)

The second fourteen-generation group proceeds from King Solomon to Zerubbabel of the Babylonian exiles, and the third concludes with one Elazar 'who begat Matthan; and Matthan begat Jacob; And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ' (Matthew 1:15–16) (ibid.). R. Askénazi maintains that this chronology consolidated the myth of conflict between Judah and Joseph. In the Bible and the annals of the Hebrew clan, Joseph and Judah indeed confront one another and continue to do so throughout Jewish history.

Unlike Judaism's formative historical identity, Christianity's formative myth calls for identity through belief:

We are Joseph on the one hand or Judah on the other, but as identities. Reality, however, originates in myth, leading people to believe in 'Joseph' or 'Judah' as values and even to deify them. The persona of the Christ—God Himself in the Christian mind—is not only a scion of the House of David but is in essence the son of Joseph, his father, his earthly progenitor. And he who plays the role of the antagonist to Joseph bears the name Judah, Judas Iscariot. This is the myth of the 'Josephist' identity of Israel that conflicts with Jewish history and its loyalty to the 'Judaist' model 'according to Judah'. Judah is indeed portrayed as a traitor to 'Joseph's way'. The author of this Gospel thus makes his intention clear. Several Evangelists, notably Paul, introduce Christians to the End of Days 'when they will find out who is who', fearing that those days are already nigh. (Askénazi 2000, 19)⁸

Discourse between Christianity and Judaism

Over the two millennia of exile, Christianity and Judaism could not maintain any kind of dialogue, not only because Christianity did not want any such dialogue from the outset—as it strove for denial of Judaism, viewing 'Israel of the flesh' as a purposeless entity—but also because no such dialogue could take place. According to Manitou, Judaism and Christianity resembled parallel lines that extend to infinity

⁸ A revealing linguistic curiosity: the French word for peephole is *juda*.





without meeting, as each maintained its spiritual awareness on a different level: Judaism in the historical, real world and Christianity in the sphere of faith and attitude:

Dialogue at the attitude level has no meaning. This is not the place for opinions, but rather for reading the Book [the Bible] and designating the realities associated with that reading. The problem should not be limited to focus on philosophical issues that ostensibly differ in said religions. Perhaps instead of discussing it would be better to think? On the one hand, historical reality: the Hebrew nation and its history as formulated in the Bible—the ‘Old Testament’ to Christians—through prophetic revelation vs. the founding myth as a matter of faith and not of identity or existence. Obviously, there is a history of faiths, but the Hebrews have no place therein; rather, they belong to the history of mankind. Understandably, there is a Christian history, but Christians as such identify with the phenomenon of faith and not with existential phenomena. A son, even when he rebels against his father, remains a son. But when a servant abandons his master, he ceases to be a servant. When a Christian ceases believing in the Passion of Jesus, he is no longer a Christian. He remains what he always was—a French Jew who has lost his Jewish component and thus reverts to being French—or English, German, Russian, etc. With these nations, Israel, as a nation, is likely to maintain actual reciprocal relations in the historical sphere, in which Jewish identity is not faith-based but rather of an existential-historical nature. The Bible is not a Jewish novel and we are not characters therein. We are not images on stained glass cathedral windows. The contemporary Christian world is discovering that the Jews represent an existential-historical ethos; they are a nation, a society and not characters in a religious novel. (Askénazi 2000, 20)

From Theological to Existential Hatred

Christianity tended to uproot the Jewish People spiritually, perceiving the Old Testament as a kind of prelude to the New, to be interpreted exclusively according to the Christian faith, emphasizing the ‘prophecies’ of the coming of Jesus and shifting the object of Divine promises from Israel to the Church. Differentiation between celestial and terrestrial Jerusalem, between ‘the true Israel’ and ‘Israel of the flesh’ aroused unequivocal hatred for the ‘superfluous’ Jewish People, as manifested in biased legislation, expulsion, humiliation, fatal persecution, forced conversions, blood libels, and so on (Isaac 1962; 1959, 349–554). The most serious accusation among all those leveled against the Jews (a stiff-necked, accursed people, doomed to exile because they failed to accept the divinity and messiahship of Jesus; blasphemers; usurers, exploiters) was deicide. Its consequences were fatal, giving rise to unprecedented bloodshed and the deaths of hundreds of thousands or





even millions of innocent people (Maccoby 1987; Cohen 1985; Klausner 1954, 1940). Every Good Friday, the prayers recited for the ‘perfidious Jews’ only inflamed anti-Jewish sentiments. R. Askénazi believed that the two-thousand-year-old Christian anti-Jewish position yielded ambiguous results, paving the way to the Holocaust, as the cross paved the way to the swastika, while the resulting shock inspired the Church to state firmly: ‘Never again.’

When the Christian saw the Nazi carrying out what the Church preached but what he never dared to carry out, it gave rise to profound shock at first. Subsequently, a religious-spiritual decision was made: It will not happen again (...) There is no doubt that the Gospels, the writings that shape Christianity, take an anti-Jewish stand and seek replacement of the ‘fallen’ and ‘rejected’ Israel (...) Our theologies are highly polarized, but there are points of interface regarding ethics. The opposite is true of Islam, with which we possess theological interfaces but stand in diametric opposition regarding ethics. (Askénazi 2005, 602)

FROM JEWISH IDENTITY IN CHRISTIAN LANDS TO HEBREW IDENTITY
ON THE RETURN TO ZION: THE CORRELATION BETWEEN IDENTITY
AND CULTURE⁹

When exile in Christian and Islamic lands came to an end and the components of Hebrew identity—that could only be revealed under such ‘challenging’ conditions—became clear, it again became possible to return to Zion and rebuild a pure and refined Hebrew identity. According to the biblical narrative, Ishmael quarrels with Isaac over the Promised Land, the Land of Israel. Contemporary history displays this more clearly; Ishmael does not deny that the Jews are Israel. That conflict is unique to the Christians. In other words, the quarrel between Israel and the Ishmaelites did not rise heavenward but rather remained on earth, whereas Esau and Jacob are competing for substantive identity—this competition does concern heaven:

In Jerusalem, various disputes determined the nature of the Jews’ argument with Islam and with Christianity—Ashkenazim in their struggle with the Christians and, on an entirely different level, Sephardim in their contest with the Islamic nations. This is the origin and deeply-rooted source of

⁹ I have already addressed this issue in my article ‘Identity and History’ (Charvit 2002, 115–117), but I would like to include certain additional aspects concerning Christian and Islamic cultures.





the difference between the two extremes in the core and spiritual structure of the two tribes. In any event, I would like to clarify that Jacob can only celebrate his victory over Ishmael to the extent that he is truly the son of Isaac. Isaac does assume responsibility for Esau; after all, he is his father. In fact, it is only in Sephardic-Kabbalistic tradition that Judaism is able to declare its victory over Christian heresy. (Askénazi 1971, 89)

Moreover, Jewish identity in Christian and Islamic countries, respectively, took shape differentially because the challenges differed: Sephardim who remain loyal to themselves achieve more clarity in organizing thought and ritual itself because they encountered no fundamental opposition to their identity. However paradoxical it may seem, the *converso* phenomenon is more typical of the Ashkenazi world, as it involves a Jewish soul cast in a landscape of Christian opposition, whether religious or secular:

The life of the Ashkenazi Jew is more ‘tragic’ in the Greek sense of the term... Indeed, Jewish suffering is common to both [Sephardim and Ashkenazim], but the Ashkenazi variety bears a gloomier hue... Throughout the development of Hebrew culture by Ashkenazim and Sephardim, the true theology remained with the latter. It was as if the Ashkenazi world related to theology as a forbidden zone temporarily allocated to the Christian faith, whereas no such ban existed in a Muslim environment. Effectively, all of us, Ashkenazim and Sephardim alike, understand what we believe in only by virtue of the Sephardic theologians of the Golden Age: Maimonides, Ibn Gvirol, and particularly Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, author of the *Kuzari*... Yehuda Halevi charted the course to be followed subsequently by the Maharal of Prague and—in our own time—by Rabbi A. I. Kook of Jerusalem, ‘High Priest’ of the revitalized land of the Jews. (Askénazi, 1971, 89–90)

Differences in ritual and mentality, thus, originate in basic relations with Ishmael on the one hand and with Esau on the other. Jacob’s prayer before Esau is not identical to that of Isaac before Ishmael because the specific problems they had to solve do not face the same direction. The name Ishmael (Hebrew: God will hear) bears a feature according to which Islam knows how to pray. A Sephardic Jew feels comfortable with Ishmael’s prayers but not with the prayer of the Christians; the Sephardic synagogue is built differently from the Ashkenazi one because of the desire not to resemble a Christian church (Manitou 2003); R. Askénazi clarifies this through word play (based on the concluding words of Exodus 24:7: ‘All that the Lord hath spoken will we do and listen’ (*Naasse ve-Nishma*)): While Esau perceives of himself as complete (the Hebrew word for ‘done’ is an anagram of his name), Ashke-





nazic Jews say ‘We will do,’ whereas Ishmael feels unmediated proximity to God and Sephardic Jews say ‘We will listen.’

‘AND IT CAME TO PASS AT THE END OF DAYS’ — THE MONOTHEISTIC
FAITHS AT THE END OF THE EXILE OF ISRAEL

The Essence of Conflict Resolution

Based on an analysis of contemporary events, R. Askénazi believed that all signs attest to the eventual termination of the historic dispute among Israel, Ishmael, and Edom, as the Creator, through Israel, has already bestowed the plan for its resolution upon mankind. Similarly, the human race is likely to realize its common ‘Abrahamic features’, that rise on the foundations of the former conflict. Judaism is the root of the positivistic religions, i.e. those based on revelation. Its outlook cannot be rooted in a ‘founder of the religion’ but rather in the essence of the Creator’s revelation, that discloses the basic truths of the world, of mankind, and of its history. The unmediated divine guidance that the Jews call Torah does not come from just any divinity but rather originates with the Creator of the universe Himself, and therefore only biblical prophecy can attest to the immanent truth therein and the consequent historical truth:

This is the way that Jewish tradition understood its monotheism. The same God who created the universe is the judge of its history, who reveals himself before Israel to disclose the ethical laws of all humanity. This ethical code was not intended to hinder human beings from achieving their historical goals but rather to assist in attaining them. The ethical conception applies to history as a whole and most of all to human history that strives for the ultimate purpose—a quest that characterizes the spiritual world of the Hebrew mind. (Askénazi 1999, 487–488)

Moreover, on the Return to Zion, an authentic Hebrew identity will emerge; the identity of Israel and all imitations thereof will pale forthwith. Christianity will then have to concede the title of ‘the true Israel’, having assumed certain metaphysical aspects of Hebrew identity, as did Islam, emulating the mother religion that they largely sought to supplant. It is incumbent upon the Jewish spiritual leadership to inform its Christian and Muslim counterparts of the full meaning of Hebrew identity and the nature of the people who embody it. At a ‘This is Your Life’ celebration in his honor at Binyenei Ha’Ooma in Jerusalem in 1992, R. Askénazi was asked by moderator Emanuel Halperin to explain





his participation in interfaith conferences. Jokingly, he responded that he did so as an act of ‘Christian charity’, noting that he believes the Jews are particularly obligated to explain the mystery of Israel’s identity in the Era of Redemption to the Christians. ‘We Jews are bidden to help Christians find their positive place because their frustration is excessive and the consequences thereof are fraught with danger.’

Christianity Discovers the ‘True Israel’

Christianity contends that the Jews cannot understand their own Torah and require Christian explication and interpretation for its comprehension. By contrast, R. Askénazi felt that perhaps the time had come for the Jews to explain the Gospels to the Christians, emphasizing that we are not talking about ‘the same religion, the same identity or even the same world’ (Askénazi 2000, 19; 2005, 579–586):

There is a basic misunderstanding. Contemporary Christians and Jews present themselves as if they were living in the Generation of Dissociation [the Second Temple Era]—rendering dialogue impossible but so essential. This dissociation turned into a conflict that transcended time, although while the ‘Jewish People’ remain the Jewish People, the Christians are no longer ‘Jesus and his disciples’.¹⁰ They are no longer the people responsible for the dissociation and conflict. For us, today’s Jews, Christians are not false witnesses. They simply are not witnesses at all. They do not represent anything that we did not understand or that we rejected as alien to our mission. Similarly, Christianity is not responsible for the formulation of its faith. Christians inherited it from their sages (...) Had they been Jews, the authentic heirs to the covenant, they would be considered idolaters who bear a message of apostasy (...) They would be like any other Jew who violates the covenant (...) We should distinguish between center and periphery, within and outside the covenant—the sui generis center and the sui generis covenant ... and all who so desire shall cling to the covenant. (Askénazi 1999, 426)

R. Askénazi claimed that revelation of Israel (Manitou 2003) began after the Holocaust, manifested in gradual recognition that the Jews are indeed the People of Israel. The rebirth of Israel and the return to Zion prove that the Christians are not Israel. Therefore, he maintained, it

¹⁰ ‘Christianity was founded by Jews. Ancient Christianity spoke Hebrew and became Christianity when Rome converted and became Edom. Islam is the Arabs, who were influenced by rabbis and priests and Muhammad wanted to restore Islam to Abrahamic monotheism in a manner similar to [that of] Lutheranism; Islam could be Ishmael’s answer to the religion of Abraham. Not so Christianity, that became Rome believing itself to be Israel’ (Manitou 2003).





would be appropriate for Christians to understand that their evangelical message may well be that of the Torah of Israel, as passed on to other nations. As its focus is Jerusalem, the function of Christianity is to constitute ‘the Diaspora of Israel’.¹¹ Many of R. Askénazi’s students converted to Judaism as a result of having studied with him, although he refused to convert some of them, insisting that they ‘not betray their mothers’ womb’ and remain Christians who belong to the ‘Diaspora of Israel’. So he instructed R. Marc-Raphaël Guedj, Chief Rabbi of Geneva, regarding Gentiles who aligned themselves with Judaism; so he responded to Cameroon President Paul Biya who was deeply impressed by his studies; and so he instructed his student Jean Vassal, who wrote a book in this spirit for which R. Askénazi wrote the introduction (Vassal 1993).

When Israel went into exile, it appealed to the non-Jewish diaspora. On its return to Zion, the nations of the world may continue to serve in this capacity, rallying in a kind of unity with Israel at the center.¹² This concept is highly central to R. Askénazi’s philosophy:

I state definitively, based on many years of experience, that Christians may maintain their self-respect and the autonomy of their faith on condition that they purge it of the mythic version of the Passion. (Askénazi 2000, 20)

Moreover, even before the Holocaust, many rabbis detected early signs of reformulation of relations between Christians and Jews, especially through the movement for return to biblical roots that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. The establishment of the Hebrew nation in Israel will only hasten the process of rehabilitation of Judaism:

Since then, the Christian mind has faced two additional questions. On the one hand, through the Holocaust, it depicts the Jewish People in the image of the ‘suffering Messiah’ (...) as in the days of the Inquisition. On the other hand, however, the birth of the State of Israel shows Christianity that Jewish identity has again become Hebrew, according a contemporary dimension to the history of the Jewish People two millennia later.

¹¹ Vassal is buried in the Protestant Cemetery on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, with no coffin and no cross; he also asked that his burial be conducted without Christian prayers. R. Askénazi’s approach resembles the Noahism of R. Elie Benamozeg of Livorno (1823–1900). See: Benamozeg 1961; Agmon 1971; collection of articles in *Peamim* 74 (Winter 1998) [Hebrew], 97–30; Harel 1993, 27–36; Guetta 1998.

¹² Vassal 1993 (Introduction by R. Askénazi); Askénazi 2005, 587–588.





All this is likely to lead to an ostensible 'discovery': Perhaps the Jews are indeed the nation of Israel! Many honest Christians still do not dare respond to this intuition, as the Church lacks the positivist theology of Judaism. The question may be answered and extended: If the Jews are the nation of Israel, who are the Christians? (...) The reality of two Israels in competition with one another in their aspiration for universal peace is clearly a conflictual reality that neither Christians nor Jews can allow to exist (...) We are confronting an issue of brothers seeking fraternity, just as the left hand and right hand are not congruent but can grasp one another. We will not limit ourselves with noting the questions that trouble us but rather together, Christians and Jews, are behooved to proceed and rediscover the roots of our traditions and identify the principle that separates us and simultaneously links us: The mystery that is Israel. It appears that beyond rapprochement between the Vatican and the State of Israel, the time has come for an ideological encounter.¹³

R. Askénazi claimed that settlement of the theological conflict with Christianity was facilitated by several contemporary events largely concerning the Catholic Church¹⁴—the church most alienated theologically from the Jewish People and perceived as the most overt embodiment of Edom: The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) under Pope John XXIII in 1962; Pope Paul VI's visit to Israel in 1964; the Six-Day War in 1967 and the spontaneous support for Israel demonstrated by many Christians, Catholics and Protestants alike; Pope John Paul II's visit to a synagogue in Rome and his meeting with Chief Rabbi of Rome Elio Toaff; Israeli Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau's meeting with Pope John Paul II in 1993; establishment of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the State of Israel in 1993; and the publication of Pope John Paul II's book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* in 1994 (Askénazi 1999, 475–476). He examined the theological dimension of each event closely and concluded that a substantive theological change is taking place in the Catholic Church despite the internal contradictions evident, at times, in the Holy See's position.¹⁵

¹³ Vassal 1993, 9–10; 'The time has come, especially for the Catholic Church, to understand once and for all that it cannot function simultaneously as the Diaspora of ancient Israel and the rival of contemporary Israel' (Askénazi 1999, 441).

¹⁴ R. Askénazi, naturally, relates to the Catholic Church in France in particular and in Western Europe in general. He was closely acquainted with it and maintained ongoing relations with it. See also: Pierrard 1977, 207–252.

¹⁵ For example, when Pope John Paul II visited Chief Rabbi of Rome Elio Toaff, R. Askénazi commented: 'I related to this meeting on a Messianic scale.' At the same time, the construction of a Carmelite monastery at the Auschwitz site and the canonization of Jewish convert to Christianity Edith Stein, who was put to death at Auschwitz, infuriated him (Askénazi 2005, 579–586).





Pope Paul VI's visit to Israel led R. Askénazi to discern a change in attitude towards the Jews. He noted that this change is recorded in a context of an even more significant change in Christian mentality:¹⁶

Indeed, this journey to Israel is certainly positive in our eyes (...) It is doubtful whether the Jewish question was decisive in his choice to travel to Israel, as above all, he sought to visit the site of Christian roots and to meet with the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, regarding matters that do concern us, the Pope's meeting with the leader of our nation [President Zalman Shazar] constitutes recognition, albeit de facto and not de jure, of some dimension of our people (...) This fact, together with changes in mentality among Christians, impels us to hope for the inception of clear, unequivocal dialogue between Judaism and Christianity. (Askénazi 1999, 495)

The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) in 1962, headed by Pope John XXIII, occupies an important place for R. Askénazi. He perceives this pope as one who has instituted substantive change,¹⁷ noting that the occasion bears three messages: a desire for world peace (*pacem in terris*), emphasis on existential rather than messianic theology (addressing modern questions), and revision of the Roman Rite Good Friday Prayer for the 'perfidious Jews' (Askénazi 1999, 497–498). R. Askénazi perceives all these developments as a kind of theological and practical soul-searching conducted by the Catholic Church through the ages: The Christian West, responsible for so many wars throughout history, that dissociated itself from questions of humanity and entrenched itself in questions of faith and ultimately bears responsibility for anti-Jewish incitement, quintessentially embodied in the prayer for the 'perfidious Jews' who are charged with deicide, incitement that paved the way for the Holocaust—that same Christian West now stops and examines itself.¹⁸ According to R. Askénazi, soul-searching is a substantive message that is likely to bring about authentic reconciliation between Israel and Christianity:

¹⁶ 'For example, I perceive a change in vocabulary, a slender change indeed, but fraught with meaning, such as no longer God the Son but rather Son of God ... If the vocabulary changes, this is proof of a deeper change, not only in attitudes towards reciprocal relations between Jews and Christians but also in attitude towards the various denominations within Christianity' (Askénazi 1999, 494).

¹⁷ R. Askénazi often noted that Edmond Fleg, Jules Isaac, and André Chouraqui strove energetically for outreach between Jews and the Vatican and accomplished so much in achieving reassessment of Catholicism's attitude towards the Jews at that Council.

¹⁸ Although anti-Semitism was declaratively rejected and the prayer for the Jews revised, the charge of deicide was not retracted (Minerbi 1986; Minerbi 2004, 21–33).





The Bible of the Jews and the Christians is the same Bible (...) Any differences in our theologies and interpretations do not originate in the Bible. Something far more fundamental separates us (...) It is not the Jewish and Christian Bibles that oppose one another but rather the Talmudist and the Evangelist, who turn their backs on one another and never communicate. If this dialogue were to open one day, it would be the day that the Christians recognize and respect the Jews as creatures worthy of love of living things and especially the day the Christians recognize the honor of Judaism, whose seal is truth. (Askénazi 1999, 450)

After the Six-Day War, R. Askénazi became aware of the touching reactions of ‘known and unknown Catholics and Protestants’ (Askénazi 1999, 438–441). He believed that these reactions were not only humanistic—when the State of Israel was in danger of annihilation—but primarily philosophical, wherein ‘the Jews, that is, Israel, in the form of the State of Israel, embody the identity of the biblical Israel’, with all it implies.

Establishment of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel (1993) was considered an event that transcends the Vatican’s interests regarding Christian holy places in Israel:

The event is highly significant from a theological point of view: This is the first time in two thousand years that the Catholic Church recognizes that the Jews are Israel. The Catholic Church is forgoing the pretext that it is ‘the New Israel’. The idea was that the Jewish People violated its covenant with God and consequently was exiled to the four corners of the earth. It was a decidual nation, an expression that has been rejected since Vatican II. The Church purported to be the New Israel, but mutual recognition brings the rivalry between identities to an end. (Askénazi 1999, 497; Chouraqui 1992)

Generally speaking, R. Yéhoua Léon Askénazi identifies an overt trend, with all its attendant fluctuations, in which the emergence of an Israeli society that speaks the Holy Tongue and has recharted Hebrew identity ‘in the Land of the Hebrews’ is accompanied by the Christian Church’s gradual recognition of Israel as those who bear the authentic identity of the biblical Israel and consequently those who will bring the desired universal peace to mankind. If the Christians persist in their identity as ‘Israel of the Diaspora’, their self-respect and spiritual purpose are not likely to suffer, and harmony may well prevail among all mankind:¹⁹

¹⁹ R. Askénazi added additional understanding of a political character. This remark even points to the return of Israel to its original identity: ‘At the conclusion of the King-





We are not far from the day on which the Christian religions, reconciled with one another, will perceive themselves palpably as the Diaspora of Jerusalem. This will be the sole positive sign of the end of quondam anti-Semitism. At the same time, their ecumenism will persist. The result will be particular excellence among the Jews in the Land of Israel, derived from their study of the Torah and Prophets. The communities of Israel in the ancient Jewish Diaspora will then have to decide to improve the final ecumenism of believers in the Bible in their own way, at the conclusion of the Exile. Many Jews and even many Christians already know that the ever-sanctified womb of the Jewish People is situated in Jerusalem, somewhere on Mount Zion, the conduit of their prayers. (Askénazi 1999, 420)

And stated even more intensely:

The long duration of a two-thousand-year parting, the horrors of the Holocaust and the shock of the Christian soul and admission of responsibility for anti-Semitism, the fact of the Ingathering of Exiles, recognition of the State of Israel by most world nations—cannot leave the believing person indifferent. And I know many Christians who attest that they have interpreted the incidents as follows: This is Divine Providence at work. Let us help it succeed, with humility and prayer. (Askénazi 2005, 597)

CONCLUSION: JEWISH HUMANISM IN HARMONY WITH UNIVERSAL HUMANISM

R. Askénazi accorded considerable attention to the need for settling Judaism's two thousand year-old dispute with Christianity and the manner in which it is to be accomplished. Perhaps this is the reason that his obvious determination exceeds that of the philosophers who preceded him, as well as contemporary intellectuals who dealt with this issue extensively, such as Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Lévinas, who maintain an ambivalent attitude towards Christianity.

For many years, Rosenzweig conducted intimate dialogue with Christianity and with Christian thinkers. The comparison between Christianity and Judaism is the background for all his philosophy. It is unlikely that he sought resolution of the conflict between the two religions, as he believed there was an immanent gap between Judaism and Christian-

dom of Israel, monarchy passed to the Gentile nations. This transition took place as of Esther, the days of the Return to Zion. We have witnessed the end of the monarchic form of government throughout the world. It has become a regime which if not despicable is only symbolic. Perhaps this is the sign for a return to the Kingdom of Israel in the messianic sense ("the King Messiah")' (Manitou 2003).





ity regarding the Messianic ideal (Neher 1979, 21–23, 235–252; 1976, 212ff.).

Lévinas was also ambivalent towards Christianity. On the one hand, he expressed gratitude to the Christians who saved his family during the Holocaust, that he calls ‘The Passion of Israel’, with good reason. Nevertheless, he was strongly opposed to the personification of God in Christian theology, considering it utter foolishness. Similarly, he believed that one cannot ignore Christianity’s long-term hatred of Judaism. To a certain extent, he does seek possible dialogue, although not without reservation regarding those who sought to do so by blurring boundaries, such as Edmond Fleg, for example. Lévinas maintains: ‘It is not enough to call Jesus “Yeshua” or “Rabbi” to bring him closer to us. We are free of hatred, yet he showed us no amity. He remains distant and alienated. We no longer identify our own verses on his lips.’ Lévinas believed that despite our harsh history, the Hebrew Bible remains the broad and solid common denominator between Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, he claimed that if the Septuagint embodied the Jewish People’s appeal to the world’s nations until Emancipation, then in the Modern, Post-Emancipation era—in which individualism is nurtured and secularism removes the sting of religiosity—the Jewish People must translate the Oral Law into philosophical language for these other nations (Lévinas 1984, 151; Lévinas 1996, 148–150).²⁰

R. Askénazi’s philosophy is manifestly historicocentric and humanistic, even if anchored in the basic assumption that the Jews were chosen as the theological and moral leaders of all mankind: the family of earth that was created in God’s image must settle all conflicts originating in each culture’s aspiration to assume a position of primacy and leadership. R. Askénazi explained that throughout history, as Christianity and later Islam struggled to assume the mantle of the true religion, they plagiarized elements from the mother religion, Judaism. Each culture bore the standard of the value it lacked and applied itself to its development: Christianity nominally strove for grace and love—the religion of love—and Islam for justice: ‘Muhammad’s Law is by the sword.’ At the End of Days, when the Exile of Israel is ended, each culture must return these ‘stolen goods’ and return to its authentic self. Moral cooperation is indeed feasible under Heaven in the eyes of the Creator of mankind:

²⁰ I am grateful to Dr. Paul Elbhar for his enlightening remarks on this topic.





If Christianity will only learn to be the Diaspora of Israel,²¹ it will resolve its own identity crisis. (Askénazi 2005, 589–594)

At the same time, each culture must refrain from devoting itself to the development of one exclusive value, as such efforts would be doomed to failure; instead, each must allow Israel to return to the principle of moral unity (Askénazi 1999, 150):

What Israeli–Hebrew identity strives for is success of the Divine Plan and all the values it embodies. This is the principle of unity. It did not succeed in instituting any kind of humanism. Each humanistic school launched a sole value—and this is its resounding failure ... Hebrew identity must accompany all moral revolutions and it must know when to dissociate itself from them and carry out the independent Hebrew revolution that entails dissemination of unity among all values ... Unity of moral values should be accorded priority. Selection of one value that reigns supreme and at times even vitiates other values is one of the long-standing characteristics of idolatry that is manifested today as ideology. Through the unity of Creation, man reaches unity of his values and moral virtues. Moral unity is what we call *kedusha* (holiness) in Hebrew. (Askénazi 1999, 109–125; Koginski 1998, 257–258)



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²¹ Besides Christians like Jean Vassal, one may identify such a trend within the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, that has representations throughout the world, including the Far East. Its adherents ascend to Jerusalem on Sukkot in keeping with the prophecies of Zechariah.





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