

Trump offends Pope Leo's Jewish friends

BY MENACHEM Z. ROSENSAFT
OSV News

The last thing a Jewish academic like myself with no grounding in Christian theology should want to do is to weigh in on recent attacks against Pope Leo XIV by President Trump, Vice President Vance and others.

However, while this did not seem like a Jewish fight or a Jewish issue at first, it became one in a manner of speaking when a UK-born Israeli rabbi took Pope Leo to task in a recent open letter for purportedly creating “a moral equivalence between those who initiate slaughter and those who are religiously compelled to defend the sanctity of life.”

Except, of course, that the Pope did no such thing.

What Pope Leo did do was to reiterate his heartfelt opposition to war and his equally fervent desire for peace. This is in the hallowed tradition of not just popes but countless non-zealous leaders of different faiths. In 1944, while World War II was still raging, the great 20th-century Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel wrote: “Tanks and planes cannot redeem humanity. The killing of snakes will save us for the moment but not forever. The war will outlast the victory of arms if we fail to conquer the infamy of the soul: the indifference to crime, when committed against others. For evil is indivisible.”

In a similar vein, the Dalai Lama believes, “War is like a fire in the human community, one whose fuel is living beings” and that it “also strongly resembles a fire in the way it spreads. If one area gets weak, the commanding officer sends in reinforcements.”

Addressing the Vatican diplomatic corps on Jan. 13, 2003, on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Pope John Paul II, hardly a liberal or a left-winger, declared, “No to war. War is not always inevitable. It is always a defeat for humanity. International law, honest dialogue, solidarity between States, the noble exercise of diplomacy: these are methods worthy of individuals and nations in resolving their differences.”

The ad hominem attacks on Pope Leo were not just unseemly and inordinately offensive. They backfired spectacularly from a political perspective. Almost overnight, they turned the Chicago-born prelate into the most influential counterweight to the president when it comes to global humanitarian issues.

After Trump threatened the perpetration of what amounts to genocide against Iran by declaring ominously that “A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again,” the entire world and, more importantly, the entire American electorate heard or read Pope Leo calling the president's words “truly unacceptable.”

Pope Leo does not consider the

U.S.-Israeli war with Iran to be a “just war” and calls for its end. Others have the absolute right to disagree. But disparaging him for asserting his convictions ignores the complexities of faith-based attitudes toward war.

Peace is a central value and core aspiration of both Christianity and Judaism. This much should be obvious and should not need to be reiterated. At the same time, there is a consensus that some wars are just. The Second World War, the war to defeat the scourge of Nazism, certainly was. But even just wars must be waged justly.

In a sermon in which he discussed “the ethics of conduct within war” shortly after Israel had gone to war against Hamas

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in response to Hamas’ murderous terrorist attack against civilian women, men, children and infants on Oct. 7, 2023, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove pointed out that: “Enemy lives are not worth more or less than Jewish lives — we are all created equally in the image of God. As Jews, we dare not let the inhumane actions inflicted on us prompt us to lose our own humanity The question is not whether Israel has the right to defend itself, but whether Israel will be smart and moral in this war of obligation.”

Rabbi Cosgrove, who is both my

rabbi and a dear friend, went on to prophetically lay out the moral and legal challenges that lay ahead in what would be a more than two-year Gaza war: “The brutality of Hamas is being overlooked while Israel is being held to a different standard than any other nation, whether because of ignorance or something more nefarious. It is a difference that betrays anti-Semitism ... The decisions of the coming days, weeks and maybe months will be tortured. Sometimes Israel will get it right, and sometimes Israel will get it wrong. The fact that Israel, unlike the other side, is asking questions of just war is what makes Israel worth defending.”

I quote from this sermon to emphasize the quandary Pope Leo faces and to take note of an aspect of the Iran war that he has failed to mention. He is right in deploring the horrific loss of innocent civilian Iranian lives in the war. I respectfully suggest, however, that he is mistaken in not simultaneously condemning the brutality, viciousness and bellicosity of the Iranian regime whose goal has been and remains the destruction of the State of Israel and the killing of its Jewish inhabitants. In this respect, going to war against Iran, or against Hamas, for that matter, is morally defensible. But even a war against an evil enemy requires proportionality and the minimization of civilian casualties.

But differences of opinion over whether one war or other may or

may not be just does not take away from Pope Leo’s clarion call on behalf of the innocent victims of all wars, including the U.S.-Israel war with Iran, the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza and Hamas’ savagery on Oct. 7, 2023.

One additional consideration: Pope Leo has unequivocally condemned anti-Semitism on numerous occasions. This past October, on the 60th anniversary of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration that repudiated the “deicide” charge holding Jews responsible for killing Jesus, he said, “I, too, confirm that the Church does not tolerate anti-Semitism and fights against it, on the basis of the Gospel itself.” He added that “we must not allow political circumstances and the injustices of some to divert us from friendship, especially since we have achieved so much so far.”

It is critically important for all of us to remember that Pope Leo is a friend to the Jewish community and to humankind as a whole. While there certainly can be disagreements among friends, we must not allow such differences of opinion, in his words, “to divert us” from that friendship or from our respect and admiration for the man who has become in large measure the world’s conscience.

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Writing the Gospels for hands-on excitement

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Because my Lent took a nosedive about two-thirds of the way through, I am still immersed in a project I undertook in order to get my spiritual groove back: Writing out the Gospel of Mark, in longhand.

It has been a very interesting, instructive and spiritual enlivening experience and I recommend the practice to anyone — in fact, I may spend the next three Lenten seasons writing out the other Gospels because the practice is opening up Scripture for me in a surprisingly thoughtful way.

Over-familiar lines that have washed past me for years are suddenly jumping out and forcing me into frequent and unexpected *lectio divina*, as I obey the nudge to stop and ponder, pray and (usually) journal over a word or

phrase before I can move on.

Admittedly, the hand will cramp sometimes, but putting pen to paper is known to excite areas of the brain that go unused when we’re at the keyboard, or endlessly scrolling our phones and computers.

In an era of predictable commentary from almost every side (being served up every day by stubborn, omnipresent algorithms), it seems jump-starting the synapses and refreshing one’s own thought patterns with a bit of cursive writing can only be a good thing.

My own experience gives witness to the value of picking up a pen. When dealing with writer’s block, I will pull out the old legal pad and start laying my herky-jerky thoughts down by hand. If the effort is tentative to start, it doesn’t take long for my thoughts to slip into fluid order as speedily

as my Catholic school penmanship will permit. Very quickly, the logjam ends and the thoughts and structures flow unimpeded.

In writing out Mark’s Gospel, old lines I’ve ceased to really hear have suddenly come alive, speaking to me in very personal ways. I read, “Who touched my garments?” (Mk 5:30) and must consider how my most hidden intentions are seen by God and can contribute to co-operation with Heaven, if my own faith allows. I see the Syrophenician woman boldly tell the Christ, “Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,” and recall that bringing our whole selves into prayerful dialogue means making a humble but rigorous stand before God, delivering reason to our supplications when God-permitted circumstances seem unreasonable.

I hear Jesus saying, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and

rest a while” (Mk 6:31) and realize how much I long for solitude with Him, and how infrequently I actually pursue that ageless time and space.

A passage that has resonated with me these weeks, though, is “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God” (Mk 1:24). Singular or plural, the opening question is profound. What HAVE you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth? Why do you care? Why am I here? What are you going to do with me?

“Have you come to destroy us” may seem an inapplicable question but not when paired with the “dangerous prayer of blessing” we make when we sincerely pray, “Thy will be done” — a surrender which can sometimes feel like it translates to “go ahead, wreck my life.” He has come to save, not destroy.

But that salvation doesn’t always look benign.

And finally, the proclamation that is both presumptuous and permitted: “I know who you are — the Holy One of God!” It is presumptuous because none of us can wholly know the All-in-All, yet permitted because it is true — so true that even unclean spirits shout the fact of it aloud — “the Holy One of God!”

I’ve loved the phrase since I was a child; pondering it throughout Lent became a lasting gift, once more, as it reminds: “*Iesus est Dominus*” — “Jesus is Lord” (Phil 2:11).

I haven’t quite finished Mark, but Philippians might be a good book to write out as well. It is only four chapters long.

I can’t wait to start it. Care to join me?

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