YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

**Rav Aviad Tabory**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

Dana Petrover (Batsheva bat Gittel Aidel Leba)

and Marvin Rosenberg (Meir Chaim ben Tzipporah Miriam)

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In memory of six friends and family,   
strong pillars of the Montreal Jewish community,   
who have left us in the past 7 years.   
All were אוהבי עם ישראל, אוהבי ארץ ישראל, אוהבי תורת ישראל.

Joseph (Yosie) Deitcher

Avrum (Avy) Drazin

Rabbi Joseph Drazin

Leibel Frisch

Israel (Mutch) Yampolsky

Dr. Mark Wainberg

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**Shiur #07:**

**The Ramban’s Disputation (Disputation of Barcelona)**

**July 20–24, 1263**

Rav Moshe ben Nachman, the Ramban, was born in Girona, Spain, in 1194. The Ramban is considered one of the greatest Rishonim. He was also a physician and was knowledgeable in many other disciplines such as philosophy and philology.

The Ramban served as the *rosh yeshiva* in Barcelona and as leader of the Jewish community.

In 1263, King James I of Aragon organized a public debate between Judaism and Christianity. The debate took place in the king’s palace in Barcelona in the presence of the king himself. Representing the church was a Jewish convert to Christianity named Pablo Christiani. The Ramban was asked by the king to represent the Jewish faith.

After four days in which Christiani quoted passages from the Talmud as well as the *Tanakh* attempting to prove Jesus’ divinity, the Ramban successfully refuted all the claims. Emerging from the disputation victorious, the Ramban received from the king a large sum of money.

This was not the first time (or the last) that Jews were required to participate in similar debates. 23 years earlier, Rav Yechiel of Paris, head of the Paris yeshiva, defended the Talmud against Christian charges that the Talmud possessed blasphemous claims against their religion. However, the Barcelona debate was different. In this disputation, the Christians claimed that they were able to prove the truths of their religion from within the Talmud!

The Ramban’s arguments were compiled into a book. As the book, *Sefer Ha-vikuach*, was published, a demand to put the Ramban on trial for defaming and libeling Christianity arose. Although the King tried to intervene on behalf of the Ramban, the pressure led to Pope Clement IV condemning the Ramban, which eventually forced the Ramban to flee the country. In 1267, the Ramban made *aliya* to Israel. We have letters from him about his experiences in Israel, including his visit to Yerushalayim.

**Interfaith dialogue**

Although forced public debates between the two religions belong to the past, the question of interfaith dialogue has proved a challenge for the Jewish community for a long time.

The origins of such dialogues go back to the late 19th century; however, it was in the 1960s that these dialogues attracted the attention of the great American Posekim of the time, Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

The background of these responses has to do with the historical declaration of the Catholic Church in 1965. Years earlier the Church had begun discussions regarding its policy towards other religions . The declaration, named *Nostra aetate* (literally: In our time), is the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, produced by the Second Vatican Council.

This declaration introduced radical changes. Not only did the declaration deny the common teaching that the Jews were guilty for the death of Jesus, but it also prohibited anti-Semitism and [called God's covenant with the Jewish people an eternal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dual-covenant_theology) one.

**Rav Moshe’s opinion**

Nevertheless, regarding interfaith dialogue, Rav Moshe Feinstein was adamant that no talks, meetings or conversations could be permitted. In his ruling from 1967, responding to a rabbi who asked his opinion regarding attending interfaith gatherings, he writes:

Regarding your question viz. that you have promised to attend an ecumenical gathering at which there will be Catholics and Protestants as well as Jews, and at which only matters of general import will be discussed, you should be aware that to attend such a gathering is without doubt a most serious sin comparable with **idol worship** itself.

Ecumenism is a plague which has broken out in many places through the instigation of the new pope [Paul VI, 1963-1978] whose **whole intent is to wean away Jews from their pure and holy faith** so that they may accept Christianity. He finds it more agreeable to follow this approach [of converting Jews] than the way of hate and murder which was the method of popes before him.

Consequently, any discussions with them, even on general matters, but certainly meeting with them is as serious a sin as drawing near to idol worship. The Torah prohibition forbidding a Jew from leading his fellow Jews away from Judaism is also contravened by attending such gatherings, because even if you and your fellow rabbis who attend were to be circumspect in what you said — being careful not to flatter the non-Jewish clergy or their faith — many people might deduce from your attendance there that there is no reason not to attend lectures by missionaries, et cetera…

Any who participate with them, whoever they are, are considered as violating the Torah prohibition of leading Jews away from their faith. You should know that the Catholic missionaries who have labored through years have had only minimal “success”. God forbid by the participation of misguided rabbis in this movement their efforts may result in even more Jews leaving our fold.[[1]](#footnote-1)

If we were to sum up Rav Moshe’s response, I believe we can focus on two major concerns he mentions. The first is that he regards Christianity as akin to idol worship, *avoda zara*. The second is his strong conviction that the Church’s intention in this move is to harm Jews by introducing them to the Church’s theology.

**The Torah’s view on Christianity**

It is well known that the Rishonim disagree on how to respond to the theological views of Christianity. While the popular opinion of the Rambam is that Christianity is a form of *avoda zara,[[2]](#footnote-2)* Rav Menachem Me’iri disagrees.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Most Posekim throughout Jewish history accept the Rambam’s ruling and as a result rule stringently against entering churches.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Some Posekim rely on Me’iri’s opinion in sensitive, delicate situations.[[5]](#footnote-5)

However, besides the halakhic matter of *avoda zara,* the rabbis associate Christianity with all the hate and anti-Semitism which led directly to atrocities like the Crusades, pogroms, blood libels and finally the Holocaust. In other words, the rabbis prohibit Jews from walking into churches not only because of the halakhic prohibition of *avoda zara* but also because of what adherents of this religion did to our people.

Rav Chayim David Ha-Levi, Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, explains how one must differentiate between Christian people and the Christian faith. In his article, he argues that, in our contemporary reality, we must respond with love and caring to Christian people. However, when it comes to the religion itself:

The Jewish people have a long reckoning with the Christian religion. Not only because in its name Jewish blood has been spilled; not only because the Holocaust, with its six million martyrs, was a direct result of this religion’s attitude towards the Jews; but also because the way in which the Church has corrupted the principles of our religion.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Rav Soloveitchik’s position**

In his responsum, Rav Moshe addresses his cousin, Rav Soloveitchik, urging him to sign a declaration opposing these meetings.

The Rav is a bit more ambivalent in his response. Although he did not sign the letter, he did oppose interfaith dialogue. In 1967, in a letter to Rabbi Pesach Levovitz, who at the time was president of the Rabbinical Council of America, the Rav writes:

We appeal to all segments of the Jewish community, regardless of their diverse philosophies, to refrain from discussing theological problems which will only cause embarrassment and inflict untold harm upon the good relationship prevailing between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities.[[7]](#footnote-7)

However, in his writings and responses regarding this issue,[[8]](#footnote-8) it is clear that unlike Rav Moshe, the Rav permits limited dialogue with other religions.

Rav Soloveitchik prohibits conversation on religious and theological matters but permits dialogue regarding humanistic matters that the entire world might benefit from, such as war and peace, poverty and freedom.

In his words:

The confrontation should occur not at a theological, but at a mundane human level… In the secular sphere, we may discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved, and plans to be formulated.

What are the Rav’s concerns?

It seems that the Rav is also suspicious of the real intentions of the Christian clergy involved.

In his famous speech and essay, the Rav lists four preconditions for Jewish-Christian relations. Among them, he demands that there be an acknowledgement and recognition that the Jewish people are an “independent faith community endowed with intrinsic worth to be viewed against its own meta-historical backdrop.” Furthermore:

We must always remember that our singular commitment to God and our hope and indomitable will for survival are non-negotiable and non-rationalizable and are not subject to debate and argumentation.

The Rav also points out that both communities must refrain from recommending changes of each other’s religious doctrines.

It is clear that the Rav is worried that these dialogues may lead to change and modification of the Jewish religion. In his fourth point, he voices this concern passionately:

We certainly have not been authorized by our history, sanctified by the martyrdom of millions, to even hint to another faith community that we are mentally ready to revise historical attitudes, to trade favors pertaining to fundamental matters of faith, and to reconcile "some" differences. Such a suggestion would be nothing but a betrayal…

Let us end our discussion today this with the Rav’s conclusion:

I hope and pray that our friends in the community of the many will sustain their liberal convictions and humanitarian ideals by articulating their position on the right of the community of the few to live, create, and worship God in its own way, in freedom and with dignity.

1. *Iggerot Moshe, YD* 3:43. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ### For a list of the Rambam’s sources and a debate regarding his view on this matter, see Dror Fixler and Gil Nadel, *Techumin,* Vol. 22, pp. 68-78.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a lengthy discussion of Me’iri’s view, see Yaakov Katz in *Halakha Ve-kabbala,* pp. 291-310. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Rav Ovadya Yosef, who quotes source after source in *Yabia Omer*, Vol. 7, *YD* 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Rabbi Michael J. Broyde and Kenneth Auman, “Entering a Sanctuary for *Hatzalat Yisrael*,” *Hakirah* 8, pp. 53-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Techumin*, Vol. 9, pp. 71-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, edited by Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, p. 267. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A few of these responses appear ibid. pp. 259-268. The Rav expressed his thoughts in a speech which turned into an article named “Confrontation,” published in *Tradition*, Spring-Summer 1964, Issue 6.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)