



5 ways

to remember *Nostra Aetate*, 4

At time of writing projects and events are underway in Catholic communities to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council which commenced in 1962. Briefly recalled here are five statements found in *Nostra Aetate*, the Vatican II document that impacted Jewish-Christian relations.

1. *"Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy scripture."* *Nostra Aetate* repudiated a centuries-old Christian view which held the Jews to be rejected by God for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah.
2. *"The Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made."* Citing St Paul, *Nostra Aetate* paved the way for affirming the enduring validity of the Jewish covenant, a covenant which Pope John Paul II would later repeatedly refer to as 'unrevoked'.
3. In speaking of the Jewish people *Nostra Aetate* affirmed that *"theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh."*
4. The Church *"draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted (see Rom 11:17-24)."*
5. *Nostra Aetate* issued a call for Catholics and Jews to come together in *"biblical and theological enquiry and...friendly discussions."*



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Deuteronomy 16:18—21:9

Shofetim: 'judges'

Why reflect on Torah?

The Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate* marked a dramatic turning point in Jewish-Christian relations. However it did not come out of the blue. There were people and groups in the years leading up to the Council whose vision and dedicated work exerted critical influence on interreligious discussions which paved the way.

One important voice was that of the French Jewish scholar Jules Isaac. Deeply disturbed by the rise of Nazism in Christian Europe, Isaac began researching the phenomenon of antisemitism in Christian commentary, and showed how this 'teaching of contempt' was inconsistent with the Church's core beliefs. After the war, his publications and meetings with Catholic officials, including a private audience with Pope John XXIII in 1960, were influential in shaping the Council's agenda.

Jules Isaac, who had lost his wife and family to the Nazi killing machine and only narrowly escaped capture himself, did not live to see *Nostra Aetate* promulgated. The fruits of his courageous work are felt in the ongoing developments of Jewish-Christian reconciliation in our own age. When parishioners read Torah with attention to Jewish wisdom it reflects a very different world, thanks to visionaries like Jules Isaac.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 16:18—21:9

Among the 'rules of war' set down in Deuteronomy 20, in verses 19-20 we find an interesting directive on how to treat the trees outside a besieged town. What exactly is the point of this burst of 'ecological compassion' in the midst of a battlefield? And what can we learn from it? Read the cover page of this leaflet, then join us as we listen to traditional Jewish interpretations.

Tasting Torah

*"When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees... You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. **Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?**" (Deut. 20:19)*

Destroying the fruit trees of an enemy's fields was practised in ancient warfare as a means of destroying an enemy's resources and forcing a surrender. Yet here the Torah forbids this practice (with the exception of trees that do not produce food, see v.20). What do you and your havrutah partner make of this verse?

Touching Torah

The sentence in bold (above) has particularly intrigued commentators. The Hebrew is difficult and the translation uncertain. The above translation takes the verse as a question, as does Rashi:¹ *If trees are not (human) enemies from the besieged city, why harm them?*

Ibn Ezra,² on the other hand, renders it as a statement: *Don't cut down the trees, for they are like human beings.* In what way can a tree be equated with a human being? In the sense of the rabbinic saying: "The life of man is only from the tree."³ Without trees and their fruit human communities cannot survive.

How do these interpretations further stimulate your own reflections on the text?

Depthing Torah

The *Sefer HaHinukh*⁴ sees in this verse a teaching that urges people to avoid all unnecessary destruction and to value the things that promote human wellbeing. *"This precept is designed to inculcate love of the good and beneficial."*

This view agrees with the rabbinic principle of *bal tashchit* (literally, 'do not destroy') which extrapolates from our Torah verse to form a general prohibition against behaviors that waste or mistreat precious God-given resources. Maimonides⁵ goes on to say:

"This is the case not only with trees. But whoever breaks utensils, tears garments, demolishes a building, stops up a well and wilfully destroys food violates the prohibition of 'you shall not destroy...'"

Thus while the Torah teaches (in Genesis) that human beings are given dominion over the earth and are entitled to utilize its natural resources for social and economic gain, this precludes mindless destruction and exploitation which endangers the very existence of the earth and its inhabitants.

And you thought environmental movements were a modern phenomenon!

Doing Torah

Continue to ponder this text and converse with the rabbis. In what way does the rabbinic principle of *bal tashchit* (above) resonate with your own values and speak to or challenge the society in which you live?



More on trees

In the bible fruit trees are symbols of God's bounty and care. In fact, Judaism has a minor festival, Tu B'Shevat, which is celebrated as the "birthday" of trees, a holiday which links Jews with the land of Israel and encourages a concern for the environment.

1. Rashi: 11th c. commentator
2. Ibn Ezra, 12th c. commentator
3. *Sifre*: rabbinic commentary, approx. 300 CE.
4. *Ha-Hinukh*: 13th c. education work.
5. Maimonides: 12th c. scholar

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (NY, 1964); *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1996); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Devarim* (NY, 1995). Scripture: *JPS*.