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Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; . . . for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

Leaving Room for Holy Envy

David Rosen

Rabbi David Rosen taught at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies from 1988 to 1997, serving as professor of Jewish studies and enriching the perspectives of more than four thousand students. Born and educated in Britain, Rabbi Rosen received his rabbinic education and ordination in Israel. Since then he has worked to promote Jewish interests as rabbi of the largest Jewish congregation in South Africa and as the chief rabbi of Ireland. He now holds the post of director of the Anti-Defamation League in Israel. Both before and after moving with his wife and three daughters to Israel, Rabbi Rosen has been one of the most influential voices in interfaith organizations for seeking ways to understand people of other faiths, believing that such understanding leads to genuine peace. It was in this spirit that he served on the Israeli team that normalized relations with the Vatican in 1995. He is president of the International Council of Christians and Jews and of the World Conference on Religion and Peace.

I cannot say that I discovered God at BYU. But I did come to understand aspects of the Divine in ways that I might not otherwise have. How this understanding developed is closely tied to the reasons for my association with BYU’s Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies.

I like to describe myself as a willing victim of creeping annexation at BYU’s Jerusalem Center. When I started, I never envisaged the extent of my involvement. It began like this:

I returned to Israel in 1985, having studied there earlier in my life. Prior to returning, I had been involved in interfaith relations when I was a rabbi in South Africa and then as chief rabbi of Ireland. My involvement in interfaith relations in South Africa came out of a commitment to social justice. In Ireland it came from a unique position where, as I jokingly put it, 95 percent of the population is Catholic, 5 percent are Protestant, and I was chief rabbi of the rest. That of course is something of an exaggeration, but I couldn’t do my job very well in the Irish setting if I were not involved in interfaith relations. Whatever the initial reasons for becoming involved, I really took to it, loved it, and found it spiritually enriching. I therefore naturally got involved in it when I came back to Israel.

About one year after we arrived, the Anti-Defamation League said, “We’d like to pay you for what you do, and then you’ll do it under our masthead. It will be, therefore, mutually beneficial.” This sounded like a very nice proposition, and I became the ADL’s director of interfaith relations in Israel. This was about the time that the BYU Jerusalem Center was being constructed, and the controversy over the presence of Mormons and a Mormon school in Jerusalem was at its height. The ADL came out very firmly and squarely in favor of the construction of the Center, supporting Mayor Teddy Kollek’s commitment to the principle that Jerusalem should be a city in which those who have spiritual and religious attachments should be able to find their home and place. As a result of this active support for the Center, I developed a close rapport with the leaders of the LDS Church, and I was invited to Salt Lake City to help the Church to get some kind of insight into the issues at the heart of the controversy over the construction of the Center. I went with a colleague from the U.S. to meet with the late President Howard W. Hunter and Elder James E. Faust. This meeting took place at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City, opposite the temple, at a lovely restaurant where I was looked after with all care and consideration for my religious dietary requirements. It was a very lovely meeting, at which I sought to clarify for those men who was who and what was what in Jerusalem, and why people reacted in the way that they did to the construction and to the Mormon presence in the city. At the end of our meeting, they said, “Well, this is the sort of thing that all our students should hear. When they come to Jerusalem, you could meet with them and orient them.” I said, “With pleasure.” So the beginning of my relationship with the Center was an invitation to give some kind of orientation presentation to the students.

Some time later, I was invited to expand this orientation to a class. Because of my various commitments, I was reluctant to tab this on. Yet I enjoyed very much the contact with the Center, with the people, with the staff, and with the students. As a result I succumbed, and the brief orientation became a full semester’s class. Initially, I was to offer to the students an elective class in Jewish history, culture, and religion. Because of concerns about balance in the curriculum, the orientation that became an elective class then became a core class, required of all students. Over time, we added a field trip component and yet another class as an elective as well.

At the same time that my class evolved, students had been visiting homes for Sabbath; but that became problematic. Therefore, my family and I agreed to come over and share with the staff and students a Shabbat experience. Later we added simulated Passover Seders. So now I had a core class and an elective and a field trip and a Sabbath meal and a simulated Passover Seder each semester. Recently my wife was also brought in to teach a class. I'm sure many people around are saying, "See, we knew this was going to happen all along."

From the very beginning, it was a great pleasure to be associated with the Center and its students. What I gave up for teaching at the Center was a teaching position I held at the time at the School for Overseas Students at the Hebrew University. After dealing with those students, teaching at the Jerusalem Center was just sheer pleasure and delight. For all the problems at the Center—especially during the summer program, some of the students could be quite bubbly and active and even a little bit noisy—they were still far better behaved, far better disciplined, and far more respectful than the kind of students I had encountered at the Hebrew University School for Overseas Students. From that point of view, it was a pleasure.

More importantly, the whole core of my own professional, vocational being is the encounter with people of other faiths and in other communities. Meaningful encounters are a two-way process. From one direction, I feel very privileged to be able to present my faith and commitments to other people so they can learn to respect and appreciate them, notwithstanding the obvious fact that not all my commitments are going to be theirs. Being able to communicate to other people of religious commitment the beauty of one's traditions is, I think, a very important thing. It is especially important for me in terms of Judaism's relationship with Christianity. Therefore, what the Center was offering was not merely a teaching position, it was also something that was responding to my own vocational being and aspirations.

From the other side, the encounter with people of faith not within my tradition is a very enriching experience. I would call it a religious experience in its own way, and I would describe it as follows: God is more than any of us can grasp. If God relates to his children in all their diversity, then there must be diverse ways of being able to relate to him. Above all, it is obvious to me that no one religious tradition can encapsulate the totality of the Divine. Therefore, in encountering other people created in the divine image, one is in fact encountering the divine presence, God's presence, to a greater extent in one's own world, which must be greater than simply any one tradition in itself. This understanding is even richer when one encounters people of faith who bring their own spirituality with them. Therefore, for me the encounter with people of faith, and especially when that faith is close to certain values and sources and texts that are holy to me, is an immensely rich experience. Each experience and encounter with people of faith is for me, therefore, a religious experience.

In the beginning, however, my involvement in interfaith dialogue was basically just enlightened self-protection. It was my perception that if people understood me, they would be less likely to be hostile to me and, hence, that through greater acquaintance, one can combat prejudice and bigotry. So what initially led me to this kind of dialogue was a kind of self-defense. But then as I got involved in it, it became much more. It became an appreciation of shared values and a recognition that working together, we can become greater than the sum of our different parts. And as I have already said, above and beyond all this, the actual encounter with another person of faith is an experience of the divine presence in the life and community of the other. I believe that the interfaith encounter is of the utmost value for Israeli society and indeed our region at large. If we don't learn to appreciate and to respect one another in our deepest attachments—which are our religious attachments here in this land—then no peace process of any description is going to hold together for very long.

For all of these reasons, it should be obvious that there was nothing that made me feel uncomfortable about teaching young Mormons. There were times when I was conscious that I was an outsider and not part of the group. It was not uncomfortable, but I had a strong awareness of it. For example, my awareness arose in faculty meetings, when a prayer was said at the beginning, or in other settings where a prayer might be made and the language of the prayer was Christological. It makes me aware that I am not part of that prayer, even if those who are praying might have intended to incorporate me in it. In this regard, there was once a person on an assignment at the Center who spoke to me about this. He had listened to me talk with the students and understood the difference in terms of the Messianic concept in Judaism. For in Judaism the Messiah is not the Redeemer, God is the Redeemer. He said, "If I said a prayer in the name of the Redeemer, I would be saying what I mean and you could understand it your way." I acknowledged that was the case. I was very touched that when he said prayers in my presence, he said, "We ask this in the name of the Redeemer." But again, even the fact that he had gone to those lengths to accommodate me, which I felt very moved by, still reminded me of my difference. So there were moments. Obviously it couldn't have been otherwise, and I wouldn't really have wanted it to be otherwise.

There were also times when students would ask questions that made me very conscious of the differences between us. We used the same terms but we meant different things, both in a general Christian sense and sometimes

also in a particular LDS sense. These differences needed to be clarified. But because our religious systems, for lack of a better term, were different, I was aware of occasional frustrations on the part of the students. In fact, if anything, they might have felt a little uncomfortable with me. That circumstance arose when, for example, I was emphasizing how diverse Judaism is theologically and doctrinally, and how the major aspects of traditional religious conformity relate to conduct. They asked me, “Well, doesn’t it bother you not to know what is exactly the case or what isn’t? Doesn’t it bother you not to know exactly what’s going to happen to you?” I could see that they were sometimes a bit frustrated, if not exasperated, with me. I didn’t find that uncomfortable; in fact, sometimes I found it amusing. But it is an interesting awareness on my part that there is that big difference in terms of our religious systems in the way we approach certain things.

I think that as students tried to understand my concept of the Messiah, which is different from their own concept, we connected; we were not alienated. Indeed, as I said to my students, when the Messiah comes we will go up to him hand in hand and say, “Excuse me, Sir, have you been here before?” And if he says yes, I will know you were right all along.

What has happened to me at the Jerusalem Center is almost like what’s happened to me in my life. It is sort of a conglomerate topsy. It just grew. I had no anticipations or expectations, for better or for worse, that were in any way different. In other words, nothing negative, nothing positive in that regard. It was just a growing, learning experience, and a very lovely one. And I continued to enjoy the discovery of the people who work and study at the Center. My only regret is—and I do have one great regret—that I didn’t do the students justice. I’m not saying that I didn’t do a good job in terms of what I actually did. But I don’t think I did enough because of my lifestyle and my commitments, which are so substantial that I didn’t have enough hours in the day, let alone days in the week, let alone months in the year, to be able to do all the things I wanted with the students. But I was moved by their commitment to me and to their own integrity. On two occasions—one was a little more inadvertent than the other—but in two cases students came to me and confessed that they had given answers in an exam in an illegitimate manner, either through having looked over someone else’s shoulder or whatever. The sincerity, the contrition, and the integrity of those students who came up to me to tell me about this—I don’t think necessarily to ask for forgiveness but simply to confront their own misdemeanor and not to run away from it—that religious integrity has deeply moved me. It is something of a paradox that I speak of those two who erred, because what it emphasizes is that the vast majority of these students would not have dreamed of doing such a thing. That integrity is a superb tribute to the faith and community that these young people have been raised in.

For me, the overall experience with BYU’s Center was enormously enriching. Where there were difficulties, the difficulties were not in relation to the people in the Center. The difficulties were difficulties within my own community here in Israel born out of the complexity, the diversity, and the enormous burden of an overwhelming, tragic historical experience. That means that there are many who didn’t understand what I was doing in the Center and may even have been hostile to my involvement with the Center. That, of course, was a challenge for me. But I suppose that President Hunter and Elder Faust may have had some intention, even insight and vision beyond my ability to have anticipated. Obviously what they succeeded in doing was to get, I think, a pretty good PR agent for their own community, church, and institution, who is trying to give his own community a more true understanding of who these people are and what they are doing. This can only contribute positively to the mosaic of Jerusalem and of the Holy Land. Think of what one saw when I conducted a simulated Passover meal: Nasser (the Center’s chef), a devout Muslim who is a *h-jj* (one who has been on a pilgrimage to Mecca), caters for Christian students and then specifically for the dietary requirements of a Jewish rabbi at a simulated Passover meal. That’s a wonderful image. But I can’t deny that the process is not without its difficulties.

Many of the interreligious encounters that take place, especially in a very open society like the United States, tend to be encounters at the lowest common denominator. Often those involved in such encounters are only superficially rooted in their faith and its religious knowledge. This kind of encounter has its value but also contains real dangers. In my opinion, the most valuable and constructive interreligious encounter is between people deeply rooted in their own faith and religious tradition. Such encounters, I believe, not only do not threaten our own religious commitments but on the contrary can deepen them. In effect, my involvement with BYU’s Jerusalem Center only strengthened my own Jewish religious commitment and accordingly helped me to be even more aware of God’s presence within me, within my neighbors, and within the whole world around us.

Bishop Krister Stendahl (former presiding Lutheran bishop of Sweden and formerly of Harvard Divinity School) proposes certain ground rules for interfaith dialogue. One of them is, “Leave room for holy envy.” That is a beautiful idea. The fact that I can see something beautiful in another’s religious tradition should not make me feel disloyal in any way to my own tradition. On the contrary, as I suggested above, it seems obvious to me that no one tradition can

encapsulate the Divine totality. At the BYU Jerusalem Center, I saw some very special, beautiful things in LDS religious life that testify to God's presence, which it has been a privilege and pleasure for me to witness.