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HESCHEL AND VATICAN II
JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

Presented by
RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

National Interreligious Affairs Director
of the American Jewish Committee

before the

MEMORIAL SYMPOSIUM

In Honor of

RABBI ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

Sponsored by

The Department of Jewish Philosophy of
THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Monday, February 21, 1983

New York City, N.Y.

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**THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
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Abraham J. Heschel

*His Contribution to Religious Thought
and Jewish Scholarship*

*Monday, February 21, 1983
11:00 am to 4:00 pm*

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Heschel and Vatican II
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JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS -- HESCHEL AND VATICAN COUNCIL II

by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, American Jewish Committee

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There is no need to exaggerate, much less apotheosize, the role and impact of our beloved teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, on Vatican Council II -- and on Jewish-Christian relations generally. His contributions and achievements -- intellectual, theological, and above all, the impact of his person -- were so singular, profound, varied, and lasting that simply to try to record and evaluate them is in itself a monumental statement that requires no embellishment. Beyond that, much of Rabbi Heschel's influence derived from his charismatic personality, his sheer presence, and that forever defies the conventional methods of the social or religious historian.

Two events symbolize the extraordinary -- indeed, unprecedented -- nature of his spiritual influence on the course of Jewish-Christian relations in our generation:

The first took place on January 31, 1973, just about one month after his untimely death. Pope Paul VI, addressing a general audience of thousands assembled at the Vatican, spoke about the nature of man's quest for God. Toward the end of his address, the Pope declared that "even before we have been moved in search of God, God has come in search of us."

Those words did not catch the attention of the world's press. What did get reported in the international media was the fact that the subsequently published text of the papal talk quoted the writings of Rabbi Heschel as the source of the Pope's thoughts about God and man. Pope Paul's citation of the 1968 French edition of Heschel's God In Search Of Man was, to the knowledge of experts on the Vatican and the Papacy, an unprecedented public acknowledgment by a Pope of a thinker and writer who was not a Christian.

The second event occurred on March 10, 1973. America magazine, the leading Jesuit journal in the United States, devoted its entire issue to the life, thought, and impact of Rabbi Heschel on Christian and Jewish communities. The then editor of America, the Rev. Donald R. Campion, wrote in his lead editorial:

"This may be the first time in history that a Christian magazine has devoted an entire issue to contemporary Jewish religious thought and life. The immediate inspiration for this innovation was Abraham Joshua Heschel's premature death...He was a dear friend and an informal -- but most effective teacher to many of us.

"It is our hope that this issue will be not so much an elegy as a lively continuation of Rabbi Heschel's instructive and ecumenical spirit. As these pages testify, he was enormously energetic, both intellectually and spiritually. We Christians frequently say that the best Christian instruction is the life of a genuine Christian. Similarly, the best instruction we Christians may receive concerning the continuing vitality and richness of the Judaic tradition in which we providentially share is the life and example of a Jew like Professor Heschel."

The editorial concluded:

"May this special issue serve not only to introduce a Christian readership to the wisdom and holiness of a man and the sacred tradition that nourished him, but also promote the love among men in all troubled corners of the world that he strove mightily to inculcate. Each of you, our readers, will have his own lesson to learn from Abraham Heschel as he speaks to you of the living tradition of Judaism, in all its energy, holiness and compassion. May the God whom Jews, Christians and Muslims worship bring us to live together in peace and understanding and mutual appreciation."

The appreciation of Dr. Heschel's inspired life and work was no less among major Protestant personalities. In that same issue of America magazine, Dr. John C. Bennett, former president of the Union Theological Seminary -- where in 1965, Dr. Heschel served as the Harry Emerson Fosdick Professor -- wrote in an article entitled, "Agent of God's Compassion," the following:

"Abraham Heschel belonged to the whole American religious community. I know of no other person of whom this was so true. He was profoundly Jewish in his spiritual and cultural roots, in his closeness to Jewish suffering, in his religious commitment, in his love for the

nation and land of Israel, and in the quality of his prophetic presence. And yet he was religious inspiration to Christians and to many searching people beyond the familiar religious boundaries. Christians are nourished in their own faith by his vision and his words."

A volume could be written on the intellectual symbiosis and personal friendships that Rabbi Heschel enjoyed with such towering Christian personalities as Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, W.D. Davies, Robert McAfee Brown, John Courtney Murray, Gustav Weigel, Raymond Brown, among literally hundreds of other seminal thinkers, scholars, and leaders in the Christian world in the United States and abroad. (Others in this symposium will treat of Dr. Heschel's influence on the Jewish world; I will allude to that in my discussion of Vatican Council II.)

On the occasion of the publication in 1951 of Dr. Heschel's first book in English, The Earth is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe,¹ Dr. Niebuhr wrote in a major book review that Dr. Heschel was a spiritual treasure snatched from the smoldering embers of Nazi Germany. Niebuhr, who subsequently referred affectionately to Dr. Heschel as "Father Abraham," predicted then that Heschel would soon become "a commanding and authoritative voice not only in the Jewish community but in the religious life in America."

During the following decade, Dr. Heschel spoke from a series of national forums on critical issues facing the life of this nation -- on children and youth, on the aging, on race relations, on war and peace. At the outset, he was reluctant to speak out on these issues, feeling perhaps the insecurity of not being American enough yet. My classmate and cherished friend, Rabbi Wolfe Kellman, and I -- both students and disciples of Heschel -- had to persuade him to address the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth, the 1961 White House Conference on Aging, and the 1963 National Conference on Religions and Race.²

1) As editor and publicist with the publisher Henry Schuman Books, I had the privilege of helping prepare Dr. Heschel's first book and to gain attention for it in the intellectual world. Dr. Niebuhr enthusiastically agreed to write the first major review which launched Dr. Heschel's career.

2) In my capacity as Vice-Chairman of the White House Conferences on Children and Youth and on Aging, and as Program Chairman on Religion and Race, I was in the fortunate position of being able to invite Dr. Heschel to be a keynote speaker. My Catholic and Protestant colleagues eagerly joined me in extending these invitation.

In each instance, his papers became the rave of these large national conferences. Americans of all religions and races discovered in Heschel a rare religious genius of penetrating insight and compassion, whose prophetic words never failed to provide direction for helping all Americans to cope with the moral and spiritual malaise of the nation. (Copies of Dr. Heschel's addresses at these and other meetings are to be found in his book, The Insecurity of Freedom - Essays on Human Existence, Schocken Books.)

Against this background, Dr. Heschel emerged as a national presence. He also became the natural ally and frequent spokesman of the American Jewish Committee in its efforts relating to Vatican Council II.

In 1958, the late blessed Pope John XXIII ascended the throne of St. Peter, and one year later, he called into being the Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965, as a means for realizing aggiornamento or the modernization of the Church. During the period of 1958-1960, Pope John entered into searching discussions with Prof. Jules Isaac of France, noted for his writings on the religious roots of anti-Semitism. Prof. Isaac's researches in this field were begun under the impact of the Nazi holocaust, which took the lives of his wife and daughter.

Earlier in 1947, Prof. Isaac was a guiding light in convening the Seelisburg (Switzerland) conference on the persistence of anti-Semitism in Europe. (My colleague, Zachariah Shuster, then European director of the AJC, played a leading role in that pioneering meeting, a role that he was to repeat with Rabbi Heschel and myself later on in Rome.) The Seelisburg conference framed the agenda for the dawning of a new era in Jewish-Christian relations.

The conference, whose thinking stemmed largely from the work of Prof. Isaac, called on the churches to face these religious and historic facts: "that one God speaks to us all through the Old and New Testaments," and that "Jesus was born of a Jewish mother," as well as to avoid "disparaging...Judaism with the object of extolling Christianity," "presenting the Passion in such a way as to bring the odium of the killing of Jesus upon Jews alone," or "promoting the superstitious notion that the Jewish people is reprobate, accursed, reserved for a destiny of suffering."

It was further suggested that the history of the Jews and Judaism be handled more sympathetically in teaching the young, and that Christian publications, especially educational ones, be revised in this spirit.

In accordance with the Seelisburg guidelines, efforts were made in a number of countries to revise harmful Christian teaching about Jews and Judaism. But the efforts were modest and the pace was uneven. It became clear that large-scale improvement was possible only if a revision of the traditional "teachings of contempt" for Jews and Judaism could be officially incorporated into the Church's teaching.

Pope John gave repeated indications that the time might be ripe for such decisive action. He personally ordered certain phrases offensive to Jews, such as perfidii Judaei ("perfidious" or "unbelieving Jews") stricken from the Holy Week liturgy. Most important, he felt the Second Vatican Council should provide an opportunity for the Catholic Church to clarify officially its attitude toward Jews and Judaism, and to repudiate traditions that too long perpetuated hatred and oppression.

In keeping with its longstanding concern over uprooting the religious sources of anti-Semitism dating to the 1930s, as well as for the advancement of interreligious understanding, the American Jewish Committee wholeheartedly welcomed the opportunities afforded by the Ecumenical Council for reexamining relationships between Catholics and Jews.

During the preparatory phase of the Vatican council, the AJC, at the request of Church authorities, submitted detailed research data documenting the presence of anti-Jewish elements in Catholic teachings and liturgical writings, and suggesting steps toward better understanding between the two faiths.

That such documentation would be useful was established through consultations with numerous advisors in the Americas, Europe, and Israel. Scholars representing Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Judaism³ -- foremost among them, Rabbi Heschel -- were continually consulted before and during preparation, so that the memoranda in their final form reflected a wide range of responsible Jewish thought. At the same time,

3) Among the Jewish scholars AJC consulted were: Orthodox - Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik, Rabbi Samuel Belkin; Conservative - Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, Rabbi Heschel; and Reform - Rabbi Louis B. Freehof.

the views of many Catholic and Protestant experts were sought. These consultations impressively demonstrated the concern of leading churchmen with the problems to which the Committee was addressing itself.

The task of drafting a statement on Catholic-Jewish relations for action by the Vatican Council had been assigned to the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, presided over by the renowned Jesuit scholar, Augustin Cardinal Bea. From the outset, the venerable Cardinal, with his passion for justice and his keen sense of what anti-Semitism had led to in his native Germany, proved himself one of the great figures of the aggiornamento. The American Jewish Committee and Rabbi Heschel as its spiritual mentor soon entered a period of fruitful discussion with him -- a working relationship which was to continue through the Council sessions.

During July 1961, in the first of a long series of audiences with AJC representatives, Cardinal Bea requested that a memorandum on anti-Jewish elements in present-day Catholic religious instruction be sent to him, to be followed by a similar presentation on passages derogatory to Jews in Catholic liturgical materials and literature. The desired documents were submitted in the summer and fall of that year.

The first memorandum, entitled The Image of the Jew in Catholic Teaching drew heavily on the three Catholic textbook studies which the AJC had co-sponsored with the Jesuit St. Louis University. The document cited and analyzed hostile references to Jews as a group (e.g., "the blood-thirsty Jews," "the blind hatred of the Jews"); unfair comparisons between Judaism and Christianity ("The Jews believed that one should hate an enemy; but Christ taught the opposite"); failure to acknowledge the Jewish roots of the Christian religion ("The world must thank the Catholic Church for the Bible"); and partiality shown in identifying the enemies of Jesus as Jewish ("The Jews decided to kill him"), while ignoring the fact that his disciples and friends also were Jews ("Jesus was held in great admiration by the people"). Most important, the memorandum quoted numerous references to the Jews as an accursed nation of deicides ("Him also (Jesus) they put to death. Because of this fact, they were finally rejected by God...").

The companion memorandum, Anti-Jewish Elements in Catholic Liturgy, again focused mainly on the deicide accusation. It acknowledged the recent removal of anti-Jewish expressions from the liturgy, but went on to emphasize that prejudiced material remained in certain texts, particularly those read in churches during Holy Week, and in commentaries on the liturgy prepared for the use of the faithful.

Passages cited described the Jews collectively as bloodthirsty killers of Jesus (e.g., "As if frenzied by a delirious fever...they hit upon the plan to do away with him"), or as rejected and deservedly persecuted ("A curse clings to them"; "Cain-like, they shall wander fugitives on the earth...Slavery, misery and contempt have been their portion"). After recalling the fate of European Jewry under Hitler, the document closed with the request that the Church find ways of rectifying liturgical passages which "stimulate and reinforce the slanderous concept of the Jews as a cursed, despised, deicide people."

The American Jewish Committee felt that these critical studies should be supplemented with positive suggestions for the betterment of Catholic-Jewish understanding. In November 1961, an audience was arranged in the Vatican for Rabbi Heschel and AJC representatives with Cardinal Bea. Following a lengthy and cordial conversation, Cardinal Bea invited Rabbi Heschel and the AJC to draw up a set of recommendations for the use of the Cardinal and his secretariat. The offer was welcomed, and the proposed document was submitted in May 1962.

Zachariah Shuster, who accompanied Rabbi Heschel at the Cardinal Bea meeting, wrote to AJC's New York office on Dec. 20, 1961, about the impact that Rabbi Heschel made in the Vatican:

"I should like to tell you that I found him to be outstanding in many respects, and primarily as a man of profound knowledge of Judaism, an excellent interpreter of Jewish lore in modern terms, and a man imbued with a spirit of enthusiasm about ultimate values...He was deeply impressed by his experiences in Rome, and with our approaches to the leaders of the Catholic Church. For my part, I can testify that he succeeded in creating a rapport with Christian religious leaders in a way few laymen and even Jewish religious leaders could have done."

This third memorandum, On Improving Catholic-Jewish Relations, prepared by Rabbi Heschel in cooperation with AJC's Interreligious Affairs Department, suggested that a start be made with a Vatican Council Declaration recognizing the "integrity and permanent preciousness" of the Jews as Jews rather than as potential converts, condemning anti-Semitism and explicitly rejecting the deicide charge.

This was not a conventional memorandum. It was pure Heschel, flaming with his Jewish spirituality and his prophetic passion against injustice. Space does not allow the inclusion of that document in its entirety in this paper, but this sampling is suggestive:

"This is the outstanding characteristic of the Prophets: openness to the historic situation, to the divine call and its demands. In their eyes the human situation may be a divine emergency.

"It is such a situation that we face today when the survival of mankind, including its sacred legacy, is in balance. One wave of hatred, prejudice or contempt may bring in its wake the destruction of all mankind. Vicious deeds are but an aftermath of what is conceived in the hearts and minds of man. It is from the inner life of men and from the articulation of evil thoughts that evil actions take their rise. It is therefore of extreme importance that the sinfulness of thoughts of suspicion and hatred and particularly the sinfulness of any contemptuous utterance, however flippantly it is meant, be made clear to all mankind. This implies in particular to such thoughts and utterances about individuals or groups of other religions, races and nations. Speech has power and few men realize that words do not fade. What starts out as a sound ends in a deed."

Heschel went on to propose that the Vatican Council adopt an official declaration "which would be binding for Catholics and considered reasonably moral obligations by all men of good will, stating:

"Condemnation of the persecution of any man or group of men on account of the faith they hold or the race to which they belong by birth or by choice.

"Affirmation that those, who hold a faith other than the faith held by the Roman Catholic Church, are to be respected for their views and treated as people who are as bona fide as Roman Catholics are in their particular faith.

"In view of the past historical events which brought great sacrifice and suffering to Jews on account of their faith as Jews and their race, and particularly in view of the fact that anti-Semitism has in our time resulted in the greatest crime committed in the history of mankind, we consider it a matter of extreme importance that a strong declaration be issued by the Council stressing the grave nature of the sin of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism, one of the most grave and historically important sins of prejudice and contempt, is incompatible with Catholicism and in general with all morality."

Beyond these declarations, the Heschel-AJC memorandum proposed such measures as the creation of a permanent high-level commission at the Vatican to watch over Catholic-Jewish relations and take the lead in combating anti-Semitism; official Church encouragement for cooperation in civic and charitable endeavors; and joint research projects and publications to foster reciprocal knowledge between Catholics and Jews.

Thus, during the Vatican Council's planning stage, Rabbi Heschel in close cooperation with the AJC, documented the crucial points then under consideration by the Catholic Church.

Throughout 1962, Jewish-Christian relations became the object of increased public attention. Articles on deicide, anti-Semitism, and the history of Catholic-Jewish relations appeared widely in the Catholic press in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. A major agapé was held in Rome in January 1962 in which Cardinal Bea and the AJC participated, during which the Cardinal called on "all groups of mankind to overcome the hatreds of the past."

In February 1962, three of Dr. Heschel's books -- God In Search of Man, Man Is Not Alone, and The Sabbath -- were sent to Cardinal Bea which he warmly acknowledged "as a strong common spiritual bond between us."

Meanwhile, vigorous opposition to the proposed Jewish declaration began to be heard from conservative-minded prelates, many of whom questioned the very idea of an Ecumenical Council. Similarly, strong opposition emerged in the Arab world on the grounds that any action taken by the Catholic Church favorable to the Jews might be interpreted as beneficial to Israel. There were warnings of possible reprisals against the Church and Christians in certain Arab countries if it were enacted.

While Cardinal Bea and his secretariat went on with his work on the schema on the Jews and on religious liberty, procedural controversies took up most of the council's opening session during the fall of 1962, and the declaration on the Jews was postponed until the second session, scheduled to start in September 1963.

In March 1963, Cardinal Bea visited Harvard University where he presided over a Catholic-Protestant colloquium. He then went on to New York for an unique civic interfaith agape in his honor attended by United Nations officials, noted political figures and leaders of the world's major faiths, including Rabbi Heschel.

While in Boston, as the guest of Richard Cardinal Cushing, Cardinal Bea invited Rabbi Heschel and myself for a confidential conversation. Meeting alone with us in Cardinal Cushing's Chancery, Cardinal Bea told us that Pope John was exploring the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations with the State of Israel as a dramatic gesture of good-will toward the Jewish people. He asked us for our reactions. We were literally stunned by the idea, but quickly recovered to tell him how welcome that action would be received by Jews throughout the world. The Cardinal was heartened by our enthusiastic response and said he would report them to the Pope. Three months later, Pope John died and his great-hearted gesture toward Israel and the Jews apparently was buried with him.

The afternoon before the agapé, the Cardinal and two of his staff members -- then Msgr. Johann Willebrands and his personal secretary, Father Stephan Schmidt -- met in private conference with a group of prominent Jewish religious and communal leaders to consider problems linked with the proposed declaration on the Jews. The meeting -- held off-the-record and without publicity -- was his only encounter with a representative group of Jewish spokesmen during his American tour.

Meeting at the AJC building in New York on March 31, 1963, the conferees, though attending as individuals, were connected with such organizations as the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Rabbinical Seminary of America, the Synagogue Council of America, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and Yeshiva University. The President of Pro Deo University, a papal institution in Rome, and ranking officers of the AJC took part in the unprecedented meeting. At the request of the AJC, Rabbi Heschel served as chairman of the gathering. Among those attending were Rabbis Louis Finkelstein, Theodore Friedman, Joseph H. Lookstein, Julius Mark, and Albert Minda.

By prior agreement, a series of key questions had been prepared beforehand and answered by Cardinal Bea in writing. The agenda centered on the significance of the deicide concept; on the urgent need for combatting anti-Semitism among Catholics; on the importance of having biased teachings officially rejected; and on the desirability of interreligious cooperation.

The Cardinal opened his statement with several theological arguments by which the deicide accusation might be refuted within the framework of Catholic dogma. First of all, he said, the death of Jesus was not the work of Jewry as a whole, but merely of certain Jewish individuals -- and even they were forgiven by Jesus. Secondly, St. Paul had explicitly condemned the idea that God had rejected the Jews. And finally, the Diaspora was by no means evidence of Divine punishment, as had been held by some; on the contrary, it had served the Divine purpose by helping to bring monotheism to the world.

The Cardinal then turned to the first of the questions prepared for him: whether the Vatican Council could explicitly reject the idea that the Jews are an accursed people guilty of deicide. He assured our group that this issue figured large in the draft being prepared by his Secretariat, together with the recognition of Judaism as a living religion in its own right, and of Christianity's roots in the Old Testament.

Other points raised were whether the Council could condemn unjust allegations and imputations about religious, racial or other groups generally; and whether dogmas and moral principles in this sphere might be translated into concrete regulations through Council action. Cardinal Bea stated that the Council could combat unjust generalizations by laying down guidelines enjoining justice, truth and love toward all human groups; but practical applications of these principles would presumably be governed by the Church's day-to-day teaching, preaching and confessional practice, rather than by specific Council action. He closed with the observation that his views were endorsed by Pope John.

Rabbi Heschel and other Jewish participants felt that this meeting was of unusual, perhaps of historic significance, in that the essential content of the Vatican Declaration on Catholic-Jewish relations was contained in the written answers that Cardinal Bea had composed in response to our questions, subject now to refinement as a result of our dialogue with him.

Under the influence of Pope John XXIII and thanks to his quiet diplomacy the tide continued to run strongly in favor of a clear, meaningful decree on the Jews. But on June 4, 1963, Pope John died, his work hardly begun. Even though his spirit continued to be felt under the new Pontiff Paul VI, the decree was soon to face serious obstacles.

On September 29, 1963, the second session opened. It soon became apparent that, contrary to earlier expectations, no quick decisions were likely. Meanwhile, the contents of the prospective declaration on the Jews became public through the press. On October 17, a front-page article in The New York Times stated that the draft -- part of a schema on ecumenism -- would acknowledge the Jewish roots of the Church, reject the idea that the Jews rather than all mankind were to blame for Jesus' death, and vigorously repudiate anti-Semitism. In effect, that text contained all the themes that Cardinal Bea had outlined in his March 31st meeting with Rabbi Heschel and other Jewish leaders.

The AJC promptly voiced the hope that the proposed measure would "represent an historic breakthrough," and that the Council might "finally do away with the epithet 'Christ-killer,' which was hurled upon Jews in so many countries in the past and present."

By agreement, Rabbi Heschel issued his own statement in which he said: "The report about a Declaration to be introduced to the Ecumenical Council fills me with a sense of intense gratification. Such a Declaration, will, should it be adopted, open new sources of spiritual insight for the Western world. It is an expression of the integrity and ultimate earnestness of those who are inspired by the consciousness of living in the presence of God, the Lord and the Judge of history. May the spirit of God guide the work of the Council."

Objections soon came from conservative elements, especially the tradition-minded Italian bishops, and from prelates from the Arab world. President Gamal Nasser and the United Arab Republic diplomats also intervened.⁴ As controversy mounted, the AJC took steps to underscore to appropriate Church authorities in the United States, Europe and South America the hopes and expectations aroused by the Council among Jews and others the world over.

4) While attending the Vatican Council, I found that a massive volume entitled Il Complotto Contra La Chiesa (The Plot Against the Church) had been distributed to the 2,500 Council Fathers. Its thesis was that an international Jewish conspiracy in collaboration with Catholic "Judaizers" (such as Cardinal Bea) had undertaken to change Catholic teaching. Informed reports indicated that the Egyptian embassy in Rome was responsible for the book and that Nasser had spent an estimated \$3 million in trying to subvert the "Jewish Declaration."

When formally introduced to the Council on November 18, the proposed draft drew the session's loudest round of applause. The next day, Cardinal Bea was given a warm and attentive hearing when he stated that the document was drafted at the late Pope John's instructions, and that the history of the Nazi crimes made authoritative action by the Church imperative. A majority of bishops plainly wished to see the measure adopted, foremost among them the American Catholic bishops. Passage seemed assured.

But suddenly, in ways still not entirely clear, the tide turned. The progressive majority found itself unable to bring the matter to a vote. The opposition of Arab prelates and conservatives apparently was augmented at this juncture by churchmen who felt a statement on Jews did not belong in the context of a schema on Christian ecumenism, or who objected to the draft on religious freedom which was under consideration at the same time.

Cardinal Bea remained confident of ultimate success. "What is put off is not put away," he observed. But the two controversial chapters on the Jews and on religious liberty were now subject to basic reconsideration.

During the spring and winter of 1964, the prospects took repeated turns for the worse. Proposals were made to shift the declaration from Cardinal Bea's jurisdiction to a new Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions. Even more significant, it was reported that a revised text then in process contained passages implying the expectation that the Jews would be converted to Christianity -- a development that created consternation and anger in Jewish circles, and among a number of enlightened Christians.

Persistent reports also indicated that efforts were afoot in Rome to empty the measure of meaning by weakening the condemnation of the deicide charge.

As throughout much of the Council, Dr. Heschel and I were almost in daily contact, and we agreed that it was now important for him to express his views on these developments forcefully to Cardinal Bea. On November 22, 1963 -- as these negative trends began to unfold -- Rabbi Heschel wrote to the Cardinal the following:

"I am informed of a few phrases which may not only mar the splendor of this magnificent document but may, God forbid, virtually nullify the abundance of blessing contained therein. I refer to the words

"Even though a great part of the Chosen People for the time being stand far from Christ yet it would be wrong..."

"This clause introduces a dissonant note of indulgence and a tentativeness incompatible with the spirit and intention of this momentous declaration.

"Those who are anxious to cast suspicion upon the ecumenical spirit will interpret this statement to mean that the friendship of the Church for the Jews is contingent upon the Jews' willingness to accept the Christian faith.

"As your Eminence knows such an implication would deeply hurt the sensitivity of the Jewish people.

"The enemies of the Church will spare no effort in maintaining that the whole document is intended to bring about the end of the Jewish faith.

"This document is a proclamation inspired by the love of God, a love which knows no conditions, no bounds, no qualifications. I respectfully suggest that the phrase quoted above be deleted."

Rabbi Heschel then objected to the proposed phrase, "The death of Christ was not brought about by all the (Jewish) people then living..."

Heschel wrote: "I respectfully suggest that the expression non a toto popolo (not by all the people) may be misinterpreted to imply that the majority of Jewish people living at that time bears responsibility for the Crucifixion.

"In recent statement by yourself and others it was made clear that only a few individuals might have shared in the responsibility for that event, but that the Jewish people as a whole had nothing to do with it and are entirely free from any guilt."

In late November, at our request, Rabbi Heschel went to Rome where he met with Msgr. Willebrands. The pressure from the conservatives and the Arab prelates and diplomats was so great that at that time Cardinal Bea found it politically inexpedient to meet with Dr. Heschel. Nevertheless, Msgr. Willebrands, who had great respect for Dr. Heschel, received him cordially and heard attentively his objections to these passages. The monsignor agreed that there was a possibility of misunderstanding and he pledged to bring Heschel's views to Cardinal Bea and the Secretariat.

While in Rome, Dr. Heschel also met with Cardinal Meyer of Chicago and with Protestant observers to the Council who expressed sympathy and support of his positions.

Late in May (30th), the AJC held an audience with Pope Paul VI during which he issued a statement acknowledging the intimate links between Christianity and Judaism and deploring the suffering of Jewry in the recent past. The AJC delegation raised the deicide problem referring to a recent address of Cardinal Spellman before the AJC in New York in which he condemned anti-Semitism and called the deicide charge "absurd." The Pope responded, "I have read Cardinal Spellman's speech, and Cardinal Spellman spoke my sentiments."

The Pope gave permission for his expressed opinion -- his first commitment on the subject -- to be publicly circulated, and the Vatican itself gave considerable publicity to the exchange of views in the L'Osservatore Romano and other publications.

On September 3, 1964, on the eve of the third session which was to be opened on September 16th, the new version of the declaration became known to the public through a newspaper story. There was no longer a forthright denial of the Jews' supposed collective responsibility for the death of Jesus; it had been replaced by a vague warning "not to impute to the Jews of our time that which was perpetrated in the Passion of Christ." Hatred of Jews was reprobated as one among many kinds of human wrong, but the special nature of anti-Semitism and persecution of Jews through centuries were not touched upon.

Moreover, the declaration in this version expressed the hope for an "eventual union of the Jewish people with the Church" -- a thought which could well be taken to mean that acceptance of Jews was contingent on their conversion. No such idea was expressed with respect to Muslims, who were mentioned elsewhere in the revised document, nor to non-Catholic Christians.

The changes in the text were received with exultation in the Arab press, and with profound disappointment by Jews and others. In a widely-quoted statement, the AJC acknowledged the Church's right to hope for the eventual Christianization of mankind, but objected to the active conversionary implications. "Any declaration, no matter how well intended, whose effect would mean...the elimination of Judaism as a religion would be received with resentment," the AJC statement asserted.

On September 3, 1964, Dr. Heschel issued a powerful statement condemning the revised draft. He said:

"Since this present draft document calls for 'reciprocal understanding and appreciation, to be attained by theological study and fraternal discussion,' between Jews and Catholics, it must be stated that spiritual fratricide is hardly a means for the attainment of 'fraternal discussion' or 'reciprocal understanding.'

"A message that regards the Jew as a candidate for conversion and proclaims that the destiny of Judaism is to disappear will be abhorred by Jews all over the world and is bound to foster reciprocal distrust as well as bitterness and resentment.

"Throughout the centuries our people have paid such a high price in suffering and martyrdom for preserving the Covenant and the legacy of holiness, faith and devotion to the sacred Jewish tradition. To this day we labor devotedly to educate our children in the ways of the Torah.

"As I have repeatedly stated to leading personalities of the Vatican, I am ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death.

"Jews throughout the world will be dismayed by a call from the Vatican to abandon their faith in a generation which witnessed the massacre of six million Jews and the destruction of thousands of synagogues on a continent where the dominant religion was not Islam, Buddhism, or Shintoism."

Dr. Heschel concluded with "the profound hope that during the course of the forthcoming third session of the Vatican Council, the overwhelming majority of the Council Fathers who have courageously expressed their desire to eradicate sources of tensions between Catholics and Jews, will have an opportunity to vote on a statement which will express this sacred aspiration."

In light of the hostile forces that were bringing mounting pressure to subvert the declaration, the AJC felt it was important for Rabbi Heschel to meet with Pope Paul VI. An audience was arranged literally on the eve of Yom Kippur. Rabbi Heschel felt it was an act of kiddush hashem to go despite great personal inconvenience.

On September 14, Rabbi Heschel had an audience with the Pope that lasted some 35 minutes. Rabbi Heschel informed me that the following took place: he gave the Pope a clear exposition of the four disputed points in the proposed declaration, but concentrated on the passage on conversion. The Pope said that he considered the present document friendly to the Jews. He claimed it is primarily a religious document and cannot be ruled by people from the outside. He said the passage on conversion is based on the scriptures of the New Testament. It is what the Church itself has expressed, and the Jews are not obliged to accept. The decisive statement is also based on the scriptures of the New Testament.

The Pope added that many people within the Church believe that the declaration is too favorable to the Jews. If there is too much pressure brought to bear, they may take the declaration off the agenda.

Heschel said that the Pope was very friendly and cordial and concluded that it is up to the Council to decide the matter.

Dr. Heschel left an extensive theological memorandum with the Pope which he promised to submit to Cardinal Bea's Commission.

In that extraordinary 18-page document, Dr. Heschel wrote:

"Why is so much attention paid to what Vatican II is going to say about the Jews? Are we Jews in need of recognition? God himself has recognized us as a people. Are we in need of a 'Chapter' acknowledging our right to exist as Jews? Nearly every chapter in the Bible expresses the promise of God's fidelity to His Covenant with our people.

"It is not gratitude that we ask for: it is the cure of a disease affecting so many minds that we pray for."

When the third session of the Council opened on September 16, 1964, it was evident that prelates supporting a stronger statement on the Jews would fight to get it on the floor of the Council. The liberals moved rapidly, denouncing the changes in the draft made, they said, without the approval of Cardinal Bea's secretariat. On September 17th, 170 of the 240 bishops from the United States met in urgent conference and publicly called for a return to the sense of the original document.

The draft was introduced to the Council Fathers by Cardinal Bea on September 28th and was finally debated on September 28-29th. Altogether no fewer than 34 Council members from 22 countries arose to speak. Only a small handful defended the weakened draft or objected to any Jewish

declaration whatever. An overwhelming majority asked that the text be strengthened. At the end of the first day's debate, a peritus (theological expert) to the Council told the AJC with deep emotion in response to the near-unanimity and determination that was shown, "This was the Council's greatest day, and a great day for the Church. On no issue have the Fathers been so united; on none have they spoken so forthrightly."

In the wake of that historic debate -- what I have called the greatest seminar in Catholic-Jewish relations -- a final text was redrafted. Unlike earlier versions, it encompassed all the great non-Christian religions, but the passages concerning Jews and Judaism closely resembled what Cardinal Bea had proposed in the first place.

Clearly and forcefully, the deicide accusation against Jews past and present was rejected; teachers and preachers were enjoined to spurn ideas that might foster hostility against Jews; increased mutual knowledge and respect among Christians and Jews were recommended; hatred and persecution of Jews, in former days and in our own, were condemned. Hope was voiced for mankind's ultimate religious unity but the time of such union was said to be "known to God alone." Nothing suggestive of proselytizing in the here and now was said; the permanence of Judaism was in effect acknowledged on the statement, that "even though a large part of the Jews did not accept the Gospel, they remain most dear to God."

On November 20th, the last day of the Council's session, the text dealing with the Jews came up for a vote. It was ringingly approved by a vote of 1,770 to 185; the declaration as a whole on non-Christians was accepted by a similarly large majority.

The Council's fourth session opened on September 14, 1965. Maneuverings and pressures continued throughout 1965 down through the opening days of the final session.⁵

On September 30, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity distributed copies of the new statement on the Jews to the bishops and released it officially to the press. The text repudiated the idea of Jewish collective guilt for the death of Jesus: "What happened to Christ in His

5) An excellent and authoritative account can be found in two articles on "The Church and the Jews. The Struggle At Vatican Council II," by my assistant, Judith Hershcopf (now Banki) in the American Jewish Yearbook, 1966.

Passion cannot be attributed to all Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor to the Jews of today." Rather, it stressed, "Christ underwent His Passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love." The Jews, it was stressed, should not be presented as accursed or rejected by God.

According to the document, "the Church acknowledges that...the beginnings of her faith are already found among the Patriarchs, Moses and the Prophets," and "recalls that Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, as well as most of the early Disciples sprang from the Jewish people." The declaration recommended theological studies and fraternal dialogues to foster mutual knowledge and respect between the two faiths. Finally, anti-Semitism was rejected explicitly -- a step never before taken in any Conciliar document: "The Church...moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, deplores hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time or by anyone."

At the same time, the new text contained negative elements that were disturbing to many. The term "deicide" no longer appeared; moreover, the repudiation of the charge of the Jews' collective guilt for the death of Jesus was now prefaced with the qualification that "the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ." A clause emphasizing that "Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation" also was added. Where the earlier text had said the Church "deplores, indeed condemns" hatred of the Jews, the new draft retained only the term "deplores." Again, where the older version, in denying that the Jews were a cursed people, had flatly forbidden any teaching "that could give rise to hatred or contempt for Jews in the hearts of Christians," the new text stated less emphatically that "the Jews should not be presented as rejected by God or accursed, as if this follows from Holy Scriptures," adding an injunction to teach nothing "inconsistent with the truth of the Gospel and with the spirit of Christ."

At a bishops' press conference, the American theological experts held that the new text was preferable to the old. Nevertheless, newspaper stories from Rome predicted heated debate over the new wording both at the Council sessions and behind the scenes.

The new version of the Jewish declaration evoked mixed feelings among many Jews and Christians alike. Together with satisfaction that the declaration had survived, there were regrets over the departures from the more vigorous 1964 version and misgivings about the new note of ambivalence.

The American Jewish Committee's initial response was one of gratification tempered with disappointment. While acknowledging the "sharp and explicit condemnation of anti-Semitism" in the new draft, and its stress on "the common bonds between Jews and Christians," the AJC nevertheless noted that the older text had been more decisive and satisfactory.

On October 14, the declaration came before the Council for a vote. In a written summary and an address to the Council Fathers, Cardinal Bea called for adoption of the text as released and defended the revisions that had been made.

The pressure for these changes, he explained, had come both from bishops in Arab Lands, who argued that Moslem states considered the earlier wording politically favorable to Israel, and from conservative theologians, who insisted that the exoneration of the Jews be qualified by Scriptural references to the role of Jewish leadership in the death of Jesus. The term "deicide" had been eliminated, the Cardinal stressed, because it had caused "difficulties and controversies," but the essential injunction to Catholics against the teaching of anything "inconsistent with the truth of the Gospel" remained intact. The word "condemned" in reference to anti-Semitism had been dropped, he added, because it was felt that this term should be reserved for heresies. (Observers pointed out, however, that as long ago as 1928, a Holy Office document had "condemned" anti-Semitism.)

The same afternoon, the Council Fathers voted, 1,875 to 188, in favor of the clause stating that responsibility for Jesus' death could not be attributed collectively to all Jews. The omission of the word "deicide" in this context was approved 1,821 to 245; the passage deploring anti-Semitism was accepted, 1,905 to 199. The entire schema on non-Christian religions was approved 1,763 to 250.

The American Jewish Committee characterized the Council's vote as "an act of justice long overdue," but expressed keen regret over some of its assertions on the ground that they might "give rise to misunderstandings." The President of the Committee stated the hope that the

declaration -- especially its repudiation of the "invidious" charge of the collective guilt of the Jews for the death of Jesus and its rejection of anti-Semitism -- would afford "new opportunities for improved interreligious understanding and cooperation throughout the world."

The ultimate significance of the step just taken, he went on, would depend on "the manner and vigor with which the affirmative principles embodied in this declaration will be carried out." In that connection, he said that the American Jewish Committee had been heartened to learn of the recent creation of a special Commission on Catholic-Jewish Relations by the American hierarchy.

The final text came to a public vote on October 28, 1965 -- a date chosen by Pope Paul VI because it was the anniversary of the late Pope John XXIII's election to the Papacy. The vote was 2,221 in favor, 88 opposed, and 3 void. Immediately afterward, Pope Paul promulgated the declaration as the official teaching of the Church.

If the declaration falls short of its supporters highest hopes, it nevertheless signals an historic turning point. For the first time in the history of the 21 Ecumenical Councils, the highest ecclesiastical authorities have committed the Catholic Church throughout the world to uprooting the charge of collective guilt against the Jews, eliminating anti-Semitism and fostering mutual knowledge and respect between Catholics and Jews.

Obviously, such deepened understanding will not spring up quickly or spontaneously. The antagonisms of centuries will not be swept away over night. For people of good will on both sides, decades of massive work lie ahead.

Rabbi Heschel joined with the American Jewish Committee in participating from the very beginning in this Catholic-Jewish encounter, the most significant of our time. He gave of himself freely, abundantly, even sacrificially. Whatever progress is made in growing mutual respect between Christians and Jews in generations to come will be immeasurably indebted to my beloved mentor, friend, and inspiration, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, zecher tzaddik livrochah.