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A Common Word between Us and You

Speaking the Truth (Dabru Emet):

A response by Peter Ochs, Edgar Bronfman Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Virginia and Co-founder of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning

The world, says Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, rests on three things: Hadin, HaEmet, V'Hashalom: on justice, truth, and peace (Pirke Avot, 1:18). God bless “A Common Word” and receive it as a powerful contribution to the peace, truth, and justice that uphold the world. This Word is worthy of the tradition of Aaron, and it enhances and extends the tradition of the sage Hillel, who taught that the “disciples of Aaron love peace and the pursuit of peace, love their fellow creatures and seek to draw them to the study of God’s word” (Pirke Avot, 1:12).

A Common Word therefore comes as a gift, as well, to those who practice Judaism, for it does honour and service to the One God whom they acknowledge as sole Creator of the Universe and Redeemer of humankind. It draws into fellowship the two other children of Abraham’s faith, thereby extending Abraham’s blessings to all the nations. In this way, A Common Word contributes to and extends the obligatory service of all Jews to repair the world and bring glory to God’s Name.

Before adding any other word about Judaism, let me say that A Common Word merits praise and blessings *l’smah* – for its own sake – as a blessed moment in the history of God’s work on this world. Its authors and signatories merit praise, with prayers for their well being and for the strength of this good work.

It is of utmost urgency that Christians and Muslims turn now to receive and contemplate this Word, devote both scholarly words and sermons to its import, and devote resources and energies to its dissemination and to its study.

It is most important now to allow these two communities of faith to think of and engage with each other, as “study partners” (what our tradition calls *chevrutot*) whose intense work and fellowship should not, for awhile, be interrupted by any other. God bless these partnerships and let them flourish as places where God’s Name is glorified.

Only later may it be time to consider the impact of this moment on other faith partners. For the sake of that time, here are a few reasons why I believe A Common Word will prove to be of profound significance, as well, for Jews and Judaism:

- Each doctrinal item in this Word corresponds to a classical doctrine of rabbinic Judaism. It therefore belongs to a divine discourse that, if Christianity affirms it, then all three Abrahamic Faiths affirm it;
- Its emphases on Love of God and God's Love and Love of Neighbour are emphases of rabbinic Judaism and the most appropriate means of engaging each faith with the other. As cited in the Word, one pillar of Jewish faith is the declaration of the Sh'ma: "YHVH is our God YHVH Alone. And you shall love YHVH your God with all your heart, your soul, your might." Creation, Revelation, and Redemption, the three defining acts of God in the world, are all acts of divine love. And, as often cited in the words of Rabbi Hillel, to cite the Torah while standing on one foot is to cite the passage "That which is hateful to you, do not unto your fellow" (B. Talmud Shabbat 31a); and in the words of Rabbi Akiva (B. Talmud Sanhedrin 38a etc.) "A fundamental principle of the Torah is 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev. 19:18)";
- It beckons Muslims and Christians into the kind of embrace that Jewish scholars sought for Jews and Christians in the 2000 statement *Dabru Emet* ("Speak the Truth"). This Word therefore extends, affirms, and deepens the work of God that we have already seen in Jewish-Christian dialogue. It thereby extends and deepens the witness of Judaism itself.

DABRU EMET: A JEWISH STATEMENT ON CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY appeared in September 2000 as a full-page advert in the New York Times (the text is carried on the website of the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies: www.icjs.org/what/njsp/dabruemet.html). Authored by four Jewish scholars (of which I was one) and signed by approximately two hundred rabbis and Jewish leaders from each denomination, this statement sought to acknowledge the place of Christianity in God's work and to acknowledge the work of many Christian leaders since WW II to remove vestiges of anti-Judaism from Christian liturgies and literatures. *Dabru Emet* was offered as an opening to *theological* and not merely social engagement between the two faiths. Over seven years, it has elicited formal proclamations of support from a wide range of Christian ecclesial bodies, has been translated into at least eight languages, and has served as the text for what appear to have been hundreds of study sessions by Christian, by Jewish, and by Jewish-and-Christian groups, conferences, and classes. *Dabru Emet* addressed nine areas of overlapping theological work between the two faith traditions: (a) Worship of the One God; (b) Study of the Revealed Word of God; (c) The Status of Holy Land in God's work; (d) Shared Commitment to Biblical Morality; (e) Repairing Anti-Semitism; (f) Accepting our Religious Differences and Recognizing that God alone can and will resolve them in the end of days; (g) That Shared Study and Work Will not Reduce our Distinct Religious Commitments; (h) That We Work for Justice and Peace on Earth.

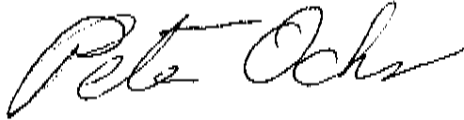
We offered these words of Dabru Emet not as final doctrinal statements but strictly as openings and provocations to deeper levels of shared theological study between us. While acknowledging that we and other Jewish scholars might already frame the words of Dabru Emet somewhat differently, I am pleased to note deep resonances between Dabru Emet and *A Common Word*. I believe *A Common Word* represents a comparable opening to theological dialogue. Here is a sampling of ways:

- **Love of God:** For the authors of Dabru Emet, the first principle of Torah is that God is One. As noted in *A Common Word*, “The *Shema* in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-5) is a centrepiece of the Old Testament and of Jewish liturgy, *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.*”
- **Love of Neighbour:** For the authors of Dabru Emet, the purpose of Torah is to instruct us in God’s ways and to call us to follow those ways. Primary among these ways is love of neighbour (as in Lev. 19:18).
- **The Call to a Common Word:** For the authors of Dabru Emet, God’s ways are disclosed to us through the study of God’s word. The primary practice of study is *chevruta*, studying texts and commentaries of Torah in the company of fellow-students, so that dialogue and love of fellow are primary means of instruction in God’s ways. *Dabru Emet* extends this study, as well, to circles of Jewish and Christian study. Many signatories to *Dabru Emet* also support or contribute to **The Society for Scriptural Reasoning**, which extends such study to circles of Muslims, Christians, and Jews (see <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum/>).
- **Supplemental Wisdoms.** *A Common Word* notes additional wisdoms that underlie Muslim dedication to these loves of God and neighbour. These wisdoms resonate deeply, as well, in traditional Judaism and are cherished by the authors of Dabru Emet:
 - **The Heart:** for Jewish scholars, *lev* (“heart”) is indeed the seat of mind-and-sentiment-and-will, the “spiritual heart” to which love of God is commanded and in which knowledge of God is nurtured. Thus, “love YHVH your God with all your heart” (Deut. 6).
 - **Fear of God is the Beginning of Wisdom:** In the words of the rabbis’ traditional morning liturgy, *reshit chokhmah yirat YHVH*, “fear of God is the beginning of wisdom (and all who fulfil His commandments gain good understanding).”
 - **A Goodly Example:** For traditional Jewish scholars, to cling to God (to “set God before me always,” *shiviti YHVH l’ negdi tamid*) is to imitate the ways of the saints before us, the prophets, patriarchs, sages, the *tsadikkim v’chasideim*, “the righteous and holy ones.”

- **In the Best Stature:** For these scholars, humanity is created in the image and likeness of God. All humans are therefore made of one form: the image of God. As different as we may live and as burdened as we may be by suffering and sin, our true devotion and obligation remains one and single: to fulfill our lives in God's image.

Let us be humbled by our tasks of serving God and the good of humanity and, in that humility, find one another indeed.

May God bless this moment and this pair of partners turning together toward His Service.



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Appendix:
Further Notes on A Common Word and Dabru Emet

A Common Word may be of greater theo-political significance than Dabru Emet, since it concerns, together, most of the world's population and two of the main centers of theo-political doctrine and authority in the world. More than Dabru Emet, A Common Word bears signatories that appear to be deeply representative of traditional legal authority and reputation in Islam. Dabru Emet bore Orthodox signatories, as well as those of somewhat more liberal rabbis. But it did not speak from out of the traditional community as deeply as does this Word. There is therefore all the more to rejoice in this moment....

I would add that Dabru Emet was intended to be less cautious theologically, and that it sought to expose a good number of points of intimate theological contact between the two faiths. This made Dabru Emet more controversial for both sides. There is a reason for this, however: Dabru Emet was spoken after some decades of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Its authors therefore sought to cut deeply to more intimate areas of theological disagreement and provoke more open exchange. I believe A Common Word is offered with a somewhat different goal: to initiate theological and communal exchange of a kind that the world has not seen -- on a broad scale -- since medieval Spain. Its goal is not therefore to provoke but to calm the two sides so that they may hear the still small voice of hope and love and, hearing it, to find themselves walking toward a common table of study. May God bless their walking and their study.

I trust the coming months are a time for Christians and Muslims to come to assimilate what has just happened. My experience with Dabru Emet leads me to offer the following suggestions (should Christian-Muslim experiences be similar to ours):

- Expect negative reactions as well as positive ones and be prepared to ask appropriate signatories (and their Christian complements) to respond to these reactions, gently but also with doctrinal firmness: in private and then, if the reactions were made public, publicly as well. This will take organization and funding.
- Nurture strong local associations of respected religious leaders and thinkers and jurists who support A Common Word and who could nurture the next step as well as respond to concerns about this first step.
- Consider composing a scholarly publication that would supplement the Word (comparable to our book, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*.)
- Consider preparing supplemental, educational materials: different publications or websites appropriate to different regions and communities. (Comparable to the work of the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies, <http://www.icjs.org/> and their book *Irreconcilable Differences?* which has been used for local church and synagogue and inter-communal groups.)
- After a year or so of strictly Christian-Muslim response and study, consider engaging Jewish scholars for another level of inter-Abrahamic study and response.
- Now, however, is the time for intensive and somewhat more local relations to be formed and work undertaken....