



**GUEST COLUMN: Debbie Weissman**

## Lackluster Visit

IT WAS DÉJÀ VU. INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE SHOULD be about breaking stereotypes, not reinforcing them. Nine years ago, during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Israel, an interfaith meeting was held at Notre Dame in Jerusalem. Then-chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Israel Meir Lau made some comments about Jerusalem that enraged Sheikh Tayseer Tamimi, head judge in the Palestinian Authority's Muslim *shari'a* court. The sheikh launched into an angry tirade in Arabic, creating an embarrassing moment for John Paul.

In preparation for the papal visit of Benedict XVI, the organizers decided that in order to avoid such embarrassing incidents, only the pope would speak at the interfaith gathering.

I participated in both these meetings, both held at Notre Dame, both attended by several hundred interfaith activists, working for peaceful dialogue. This time, the pope gave an academic presentation about religions in an age of globalization, ending with words of inspiration and encouragement for the audience.

At the conclusion of the program, Tamimi grabbed the microphone and began a tirade, similar to the one nine years before. He shouted about Israeli plots to Judaize Jerusalem, destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque and "to kill Gaza's children." His performance was the polar opposite of what had been the spirit of the meeting up until that point. The pope, visibly displeased, left without attending the festive reception that had been planned for afterward.

One of the aspects of this fiasco that disturbed me was that although Tamimi's behavior was inappropriate and he wildly exaggerated his claims, there certainly is a kernel of truth in his complaints about unjust treatment of people living under occupation. But the way he presented his case simply reinforced the negative stereotypes many people in the world have about Islam and about Muslims – stereotypes that were repeated in this pope's Regensburg address in 2006. Tamimi, rather than garnering support for his cause, was shooting himself in the foot. We in the world of interfaith dialogue spend many hours trying to convince Jews and Christians that there are many fine Muslims in the world, people of compassion and peace. Incidents like these make our work that much tougher.

Another low point of Benedict's visit was his lackluster speech at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial. One might have expected, given his own personal background in the Hitler Jugend Nazi youth movement and given the recent flap over Holocaust-denying Catholic Bishop Richard Williamson, that the pope would have used the opportunity to say something more significant. This is doubly disappointing after Pope John Paul II's dramatic visit to Yad Vashem in 2000. The difference

between the two men is not only one of personal warmth and charisma. This pope – formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – was and remains a theology professor; his predecessor, Karol Jozef Wojtyla, before entering the Polish seminary, had been an actor and a playwright and remained the master of the symbolic gesture. But many forget that even he, in the late 1980s, was the target of much Jewish criticism for his welcome to the Vatican of former Nazi officer, and later Austrian chancellor, Kurt Waldheim.

So were there any highlights of this Papal visit? I think there were: During his visit to Jordan, Benedict, like Moses, stood on Mt. Nebo and viewed the Promised Land; but unlike Moses, he was able to enter it on the Israeli side. During his talk there, he recalled the "inseparable bond" between Christians and the Jewish people, who share the Hebrew Scriptures. He expressed the desire to "overcome all obstacles to the reconciliation of Christians and Jews in mutual respect and cooperation." He also acknowledged powerfully the deep connection among Jews, the Torah and the Land of Israel.

The anti-Israeli criticism leveled at these remarks by some Muslims and Christians in Jordan and the need for the Vatican spokesman in Jordan to soft-pedal them, saying that the pope was speaking only in a religious vein, showed me how important a statement he had made.

Secondly, when the Royal Jordanian jet landed at Ben-Gurion Airport, the plane of a predominantly Muslim country bore the blue-and-white flag of the Jewish State and the yellow-and-white flag of the Vatican. Finally, at the welcome ceremony at the airport, the pope condemned unequivocally anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.

These gestures are both symbolic and substantive. In the world Jewish community's continuing dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, we have to build on these statements as well as those that have come before, emanating from the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s. The present pope has expressed somewhat ambivalent or, at least, ambiguous views on certain key topics of concern to Jews. We should be striving for greater clarity and understanding. Or, as my friend and colleague, Father John Pawlikowski, of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, has said: "Perhaps the best we can hope for is no further backward steps."

One further comment for the organizers of the next pope's visit: when you organize a meeting dedicated to interfaith dialogue, and the format of the meeting itself isn't dialogical, you may be inviting disaster. And perhaps next time, you might consider including some women on the podium. ●

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