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A Christian on Listening with Jewish Ears and Hearing with the Heart of God

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A CHRISTIAN ON LISTENING WITH JEWISH EARS AND HEARING WITH THE HEART OF GOD

*Randy Lee**

Several years ago, Sam Levine invited me, a Christian, to speak on a panel of Jewish legal scholars who were to compare Judaism and the American legal system. I was excited by the opportunity but, needless to say, a little apprehensive about how Sam's fellow Jews might perceive me. When the day of the panel arrived and my turn to speak presented itself, I began, I suspect, a little tentatively, even a little nervously.

Sometimes, events unfold in a way that proves one's greatest, seemingly irrational fears have been warranted, and as events unfolded on this particular day, that appeared certainly to be the case. In fact, no sooner had I hit the forty-five second mark in my talk than Irene Rosenberg suddenly slapped her hand down over my notes and said, "Stop. Stop right there."

Irene, who was on the panel with me, was a Jewish law professor from the University of Houston.¹ As I sat there in panicked silence with Irene's hand on my notes, I can remember thinking to myself, "What did I say—I haven't even gotten to the offensive stuff yet," which was an ironic thing to think because I really wasn't there to be offensive. I had hoped I was there to be true—I had actually hoped to be Jewish.

You see, a few years before this, I had met Sam Levine at a Fordham conference on law and religion,² and Sam had gotten me thinking about what it meant to be Jewish. I remember the first time

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¹ Obituary, *Irene Merker Rosenberg*, HOUS. CHRON, Nov. 18, 2010, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/houstonchronicle/obituary.aspx?n=irene-merker-rosenberg&pid=146686573#fb> LoggedOut.

² Leslie Griffin, *The Relevance of Religion to a Lawyer's Work: Legal Ethics*, 66 FORDHAM L. REV. 1253 (1998).

I saw Sam at the conference. Fordham had set up this grand buffet dinner, and I was standing in line, waiting to fill my plate, when I noticed Sam and these two other gentlemen sitting by themselves at this tiny table eating boxed lunches while the rest of us were lining up at the buffet. Although this all struck me as rather curious, it did so only for a moment. Indeed, it wasn't hard for even me to figure out what was going on because each of these men was wearing a yarmulke. They were Jews insisting on eating Kosher at the conference.

Over the next few days, God kept putting Sam Levine in my path, and the more I got to know Sam, the more I realized that here was a someone who, when he ate, he ate to please God; when he dressed, he dressed to please God; when he thought and wrote, he thought and wrote to please God. And the more I got to know Sam, the clearer it became to me that if I wanted to become a better Christian, I would need to become a better Jew.

Of course, one can't become a better Jew without coming to grips with the experience of the Jewish people with God, so after that conference, I started studying and thinking about the God and the law of the Hebrew Scriptures. As I did so, I would occasionally ask Sam questions, not as a curious spectator but as someone who needed to understand the texts, to find the truth in them.³ Then suddenly, here I was, forty-five seconds into my first attempt to discuss my thoughts on Judaism in public, and I was hit with a cease and desist order from someone who had been immersed in this material her whole life.

There we were, just hanging in this silence for what felt like to me a week and a half—it remains the only time in my life I've ever wanted to have the moderator tell me my time was up, and finally Irene said to me, "That . . . is so beautiful."

I was stunned. I was so confused about what Irene could have thought was so beautiful that I started trying to see around her fingers to figure out what I had said that she could have liked. In fact, even after the panel had ended, I was still trying to figure it out. I went out

³ Randy Lee, *When a King Speaks of God; When God Speaks to a King: Faith, Politics, Tax Exempt Status, and the Constitution in the Clinton Administration*, 63 *LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS.* 391, 429-30 (2000):

If religious diversity is to be a vehicle of truth, then we must not treat it like a trip to the zoo, where we are pleased to be able to view all the different animals but grateful we do not have to take any of them home. Instead, we must treat it as a shopping trip to the mall, a trip in which we intend to purchase the goods we need to furnish our home.

Id.

in the hall and kept going over my introduction, over and over, until finally I realized three things. First, I realized that what I had said wasn't all that beautiful; all pretenses of humility aside, it just wasn't.⁴ Second, I realized what had been really beautiful was not what I had said but the way in which Irene had listened. Finally, I realized that if I wanted to become a better Christian, it wasn't going to be enough just to dress for God or eat for God or even think and write for God. I was going to have to learn to listen as God listens. I was going to have to learn to listen and hear as Irene did. I was going to have to learn to listen and hear like a Jew.

In the film *A Late Quartet*,⁵ a group of string students at a very elite music school are being very petty to one another, very hyper-critical.⁶ In response, their cello teacher tells these students about a pair of meetings he had had years ago with the great cellist Pablo Cassals.⁷ The teacher tells the students how during their first meeting, Cassals had asked the teacher to play, and the teacher had been so intimidated by Cassals that he had played terribly.⁸ Cassals, however, had kept praising him anyway, obviously patronizing him, which, of course, had only made things worse.⁹

Years later, the two cellists met again, and the teacher called Cassals out on his insincerity at the earlier meeting.¹⁰ In response,

⁴ Randy Lee, *Judaism and John Paul II: Coming to Grips With What Law Means in the Hands of God*, 45 J. CATH. LEGAL STUD. 415, 415 (2006). The text is included here so the reader can feel free to form his or her own judgments. In reflecting on Jewish families gathering for the Shabbat in his native Warsaw:

Pope John Paul II was remembering law, but not law as it is recorded in books. He was remembering law as made flesh in the lives of his Jewish neighbors, and it was good. It was law designed in love to bring peace to a community. This was law which protected God's chosen from the business of life and from the deception and worship of self, and ultimately it was law which brought this people closer to God and to His saving grace. This law was not the arbitrary precepts of an angry bureaucrat. It was, instead, the affectionate kiss of a passionate suitor, a God seeking to be a Beloved. Pope John Paul II had seen all this in the candles and the families gathered together for the Shabbat. He had heard it in the psalms sung and in the voices of the children, and he never forgot it.

Id.

⁵ A LATE QUARTET (Opening Night Productions 2012).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ A LATE QUARTET, *supra* note 5.

Cassals became indignant.¹¹ He grabbed his cello and played phrases and measures from the teacher's efforts from years before that Cassals had found novel and exciting.¹² Cassals, it turned out, had listened to the teacher as Irene had listened to me and as God listens; he had listened for the good stuff, the things he enjoyed.¹³ He had chosen to encourage rather than to judge by counting faults.¹⁴ As Cassals put it, "I can be grateful, and so must you be, . . . for even one singular phrase, one transcendent moment."¹⁵

To listen like God is to listen like Cassals and Irene Rosenberg, to listen for transcendent moments rather than for all the mistakes. As the Apostle Paul instructed the believers in Philippi, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."¹⁶ Paul said this because we are made in the image of God,¹⁷ so we are to listen in the image of God.

The Christian songwriter Rich Mullins used to say:

God's got this great big refrigerator up there in [H]eaven, that's just covered with what we do. Angels come by for a drink or something, and they see all the junk on His refrigerator, and they go, "God! What are You thinking! You own the cattle on a thousand hills, surely You could afford a few good pieces of work!" Then God goes, "Ah, I know. But my kid made that."¹⁸

Had Irene chosen to listen to the mistakes in my talk, to all the places where I had colored outside the lines, there would have been plenty for her to hear. But she didn't. She chose, instead, to listen to me in a way that allowed her to exhort and encourage me in what she

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *A Late Quartet Quotes*, INTERNET MOVIE DATABASE, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1226240/quotes?ref_=tt_ql_3 (last visited Jan. 6, 2014).

¹⁶ *Philippians* 4:8 (English Standard).

¹⁷ *Genesis* 1:27 (English Standard).

¹⁸ RICH MULLINS, GREEN BAY, WI CONCERT TRANSCRIPT (1997), available at <http://www.kidbrothers.net/rmml/rmml209/greenbay.html>.

believed to be true and good. She listened to me in a way that made me believe I could become more, better, than I was. As Irene listened to me, she made me her friend, her neighbor.¹⁹

Irene didn't just listen to me as God listens; she also heard me as God hears. Sometimes, as lawyers, we need to hear that way too because sometimes there really aren't any transcendent moments to hear, and when that happens and you're God, you hear beyond the words to hear what should have been, might have been articulated. Paul tells us in *Romans* that even when we do not know how to pray, the Holy Spirit takes our prayers and no matter how broken they are, God hears what we ought to have spoken.²⁰

A brilliant friend of mine struggled with alcohol early in his marriage, and finally his wife threatened to throw him out if he didn't go to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and clean up his act. He was unemployed at the time, and his wife was a doctor, so he had a real incentive to go to AA even if he didn't have much interest in cleaning up his act or giving up drinking. He went to AA, however, with a great deal of anger, and every week he would show up at the meetings and blast everyone there. He would tell them, "I know what this really is. I know what you're selling. I see through this nonsense. I know who this 'Power greater than ourselves' is."²¹

"I know you're just a bunch of liars. I know you're just a bunch of hypocrites. I know you're all frauds."

And all the time, the guys at AA are all saying, "Yeah, you're right. Just come back next week," because in spite of his words, what they could hear in his voice was, "My life's a mess, and I'm scared, and I'm isolated, and I don't think I can change it or fix it, and everyone is trying to take from me the one thing that seems to get me

¹⁹ See *Luke* 10:36-37 (English Standard) Jesus asked, during the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*, "Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" to which the lawyer responds, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go and do likewise." *Id.*

²⁰ *Romans* 8:26-27 (English Standard):

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Id.

²¹ *Step Two*, ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, http://www.aa.org/twelveandtwelve/en_pdfs/en_step2.pdf (last visited Jan. 6, 2014) ("Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.").

through the day.” Their ability to hear beyond his words ultimately saved my friend’s life.

When I was in college, I had two friends who ran a Friday night Bible study on campus. Also at the time, Campus Crusade for Christ had a speaker who was touring with a talk on how much Christ had suffered during the Passion. One of my friends heard this speaker during a retreat, and she was so blown away by the talk that she got a tape of it so she could play it at one of these Friday night Bible studies.

This first friend played the tape for my other friend, and she was also blown away, so the two of them decided that this tape was the key to converting the whole campus. The two of them decided to make the meeting at which they would play the tape, a really big event, and they set out to get as many people as they could to come. They put up posters all over campus. They invited everyone they knew. They even bought food and promised to serve it at this meeting as an additional enticement. Obviously, for the two of them, this meeting was to be a really big deal.

The night of the meeting arrived, and my two friends played the tape for all of us in attendance. On the first side, the speaker described physiologically what has to go on inside someone to cause them to sweat blood and what it meant to be scourged by Roman soldiers: how one’s flesh would be ripped off one’s body during such a scourging.

Now these two women were getting really excited as this first side played because they understood this tape as an incredible expression of what Christ had meant when He had said “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends,”²² and “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”²³ Therefore, when it came time to turn the tape over, the two of them just couldn’t contain themselves, and they had to ask, “What do you guys think so far?”

When my two friends asked that, everyone got very quiet, and then this one guy raised his hand and said, “Frankly, I find the tape gratuitous violence. I’m offended by it. I know Jesus loves me. I don’t need to dwell on the brutality done to him. This is just sick, and I can’t believe we’re listening to this.”

²² *John* 15:13 (English Standard).

²³ *John* 10:18 (English Standard).

Of course my two friends were stunned by this and didn't know what to say. A few people tried to explain to the guy that knowing what Christ willingly endured for us helps one to understand how much He loved each one of us, but the guy would twist their words and confuse them. Ultimately, the guy carried the day, and we never listened to the other side of the tape. We didn't even eat the food. Everyone ultimately just shuffled out, and my two friends were left all by themselves, really disappointed with how the evening had gone.

Now this was not the first time that this had happened with this guy. In fact, every time he showed up at a meeting, he twisted the meeting around in the name of God. One meeting he convinced everyone they didn't need to pray. At another meeting, he convinced people real Christians shouldn't go to church.

These were not the messages my friends were hoping to spread, and one would have thought at some point before he'd ruined this night that my friends would've figured out to stop inviting this guy to their meetings, but they hadn't, and now here they were, all their plans, all their hopes, all their good intentions smashed around them.

It was at that point that my friends did a most curious thing, something which I clearly would not have understood if I had stuck around long enough that night to see it. They got down on their knees, and they prayed for that guy, not because they thought it would do any good, because they told me later that they were certain it would not, but because they had heard that guy that night with the heart of God—beyond his words.

And the guy they prayed for that night was me, and if they had not listened to me that night with God's ears and heard me with His Heart, I would not be here at this conference today; I would never have come to see the truth and beauty in God's law. My friends, my neighbors, my advocates, sorted through all the smoldering waste of my actions and my verbiage until they found a spark, and then they nurtured that spark until it was a fire.

A few years ago, I was hanging out with a couple of deans of religiously affiliated law schools, and they were explaining to me how if their schools really sought to produce Godly lawyers, no one would hire their graduates and no students would want to come to their schools.

As I listened to the theories and the reasonings of these two

deans, I began to wonder why we're so quick to concede that Godly lawyers are at such a disadvantage because of all the ungodly things they aren't be able to do; why we're so certain that Godly lawyers necessarily offer their clients less than do other lawyers. "Maybe," I thought, "all those things Godly lawyers can't do for their clients are not nearly as important as the things they can do, like hearing their clients as God would hear them."

When I think over my own career, the clients I have tried to serve, I wonder how my clients' lives might have been different if those two women from my college had become lawyers and had served those clients instead of me serving them. I wonder how those women would have listened to my clients who came to them as drug addicts and thieves and rapists and killers, yet, also as children of God who in their Father's eyes still had a purpose "and a hope."²⁴ I wonder what those women might have heard when their client said to them, "After all my spouse has put me through, I want to hurt her back so you serve her those divorce papers at our family Christmas party." I wonder what it might have meant to those clients to be heard and listened to as those two women had heard and listened to me. I wonder if the lives of those clients might have been transformed, as mine has been, if someone could have heard and listened to them Jewish—with the ears and heart of God.

²⁴ *Jeremiah* 29:11 (English Standard) ("For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.").