Jewish Pathways to Peace: A Response to Rabbi Rene-Samuel Sirat

In line with the admirable presentation by Chief Rabbi Renè-Samuel Sirat, I propose to touch on some notions characterizing the word *shalom*—peace—in the Hebraic tradition. To shed light on this, as I am not a Rabbi, I will base this discussion on the teachings of Rabbi Tsvi Yehouda Kook and Rabbi Leon Ashkenazi, as transmitted to me by Eliezer Cherqui, a disciple of these two great masters.

The task of grasping the notion of peace in Judaism is certainly an ambitious one, since the very notion sums up, in a way, the whole scheme of the Creator for his creation.

The Hebrew word *shalom* is, in fact, one of the designations for God himself. We find this usage as early as the Biblical period: the judge Gideon, after having experienced a prophetic revelation, builds an altar to God and calls it *Jehovahshalom*, which means “The Lord is Peace” (Judges, VI, 24). The Talmud, evoking this chapter in the Tractate Sabbath, states clearly that “*shalom* is the name of The Holy One, Blessed be He.” As a matter of fact, to this day some religious Jews avoid writing this word except in abbreviated form (the Tetragramme), due to its sanctity.

Yet, paradoxically, the word *shalom* is the one used by the people of Israel since the most ancient of times to welcome and greet one another. How can we explain this paradox? How can we explain the use, informal and “profane” as it were, of a term so charged with sanctity?

I believe that the answer may reside in the very meaning of the word *shalom*. Indeed, this term not only signifies peace, but also contains the idea of shelemout; that is, the quality of that which is perfect, a whole, undivided, unbreakable.

In that sense, *shalom* can very well pertain to God. But it applies also to humanity. Yes, in the earthly reality of our world, the primary
oneness is occult: each being is in expansion and strives to occupy the entire space, therefore to alter the shelemout of the other.

The most spectacular example of the absence of shalom in interhumane relationship manifests itself right away in the form of fratricide as soon as we are introduced to the first “brother.” It will be interesting to dwell for a moment on this tragedy, and to try to understand its meaning in light of Rabbi Leon Ashkenazi’s commentary on it. He writes, history seems to start with a failure.

The first generation, that of Adam and Eve, was a stranger to the social problem. Between the two of them, it was not about a relationship with one another and the test they are put to in the Book of Genesis is that of the couple as a unit and its relationship with the Creator.

On the other hand, the occurrence of society according to the strictest definition of the term, that is, the relationship of an individual with an individual, begins with the second generation, that of Cain and Abel. The birth of violence in the world, its mechanics, its reason for being, is linked to the flaws, the lack or the negation of a true relationship of shalom.

Rabbi Ashkenazi explains this deficiency in the following manner: “It is written in Leviticus XIX, 18, thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself and the great Rabbi Akiba adds thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself, which is a key principle of the Torah.” The principle may well remain an abstract thought, a pure ideal of good intentions, if it is not applied and applied efficiently. Now, the secret of this efficiency lies in reciprocity, which is the meaning of the expression “as thyself.”

This appeal for reciprocity is, according to Rabbi Akiba, the basic condition for the surfacing of an efficient fraternity, meaning the kind that translates into action. And it is the disrespect for this principle of reciprocity that brings forth the violence of Cain. Indeed, one notices that in the text of the Book of Genesis, Abel alone is assigned the word “brother” whereas Cain is born first and is self-contained. He cannot tolerate the other, born in addition, extra, as the text suggests: “she conceived and bore,” then “vatossef laledet” (Genesis, IV, 1): she continued to bear, as the Bible adds, “Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel.”

To Cain, Abel is the other; he cannot tolerate the other born in addition unless his own excellence is recognized. But this does not
occur: he does away with Abel and the word "brother" is henceforth stricken from the narrative. We will have to wait until the introduction of Abraham for the term to re-emerge and with it, the hope for fraternity. According to Rabbi Ashkenazi, after the murder of Abel, the biblical narrative becomes literally that of the search for fraternity (a little like what we call affiliation – the search for paternity). And this problem will be illustrated again later, after Abraham, with the account of Jacob and of Joseph and his brothers: "Go, I pray thee, see whether there be shalom with thy brethren." For Jacob, the problem that man needs to resolve is that of the coexistence of brothers among themselves. This is due to the fact that we are creatures. The Creator readily offers us all the being by letting us be among one another; but, by the very same act, he creates his creatures as rivals to one another and gives us all but the brotherly love which he requires from us for our salvation.

This call for unity in the respect for diversity, this unflagging quest for fraternity is a fundamentally humane task, and it is this quest that we express when we meet another and greet each other with the word shalom. In short, the road to peace runs through the recognition of the other in his entirety. As Emmanuel Levinas puts it: "the only path to respect for God is that to respect for one's neighbor."

I would like to tackle at present another theme of our conference. In the letter he sent to us, Dr. David Coppola suggests giving some thought to the following question: "What can we do to improve our teachings and practices to achieve peace?"

After the prodigious and auspicious developments that are Seelisberg, John XXIII, Vatican II, the declaration of repentance, the recognition of the State of Israel, the Pope's visit to Israel and the Wailing Wall, it seems to me that the relations between religions and in particular between Judaism and Christianity can be taken even further and take on new, greater dimensions, specifically if they are inspired by the shalom of the shelemout, that is of the concept of “entirety,” of plenitude. Which means that the condition for the widening of the dialogue requires one not to look to diminish and mutilate the integrity of the faith of one's neighbor. In other words, our discussion cannot take place in the spheres of theology, of our identities. However, our proximity, our intimacy even, I would say, will assert itself thanks to our profound and numerous convergences which are rooted in our respective faiths.

We share, in fact, the same vision of the world and of humankind, the same idea of the dignity of the human being and of life; we have the
same values, same references, and in this de-sanctified and torn world, we are all on the same side. When, for instance, I take part in the proceedings of medical bioethics, which nowadays deal with the essential, I am always struck by how all those who proclaim the Bible share the same ethical approach to questions that often touch respect for mankind, for life and for the preservation of the species. It is our convergences that, in my view, have to be underlined and exalted.

I would like to share with you a personal experience. I have the honor of presiding over the Alliance Israelite Universelle, a venerable institution that was founded over 140 years ago. Its calling is educational, by means of the Jewish school, and cultural, through notably our Judaica Library (the largest in Europe), our Jewish research division, and even more so through the School for Jewish Studies. The Alliance, moreover, is particularly engaged in the dialogue between religions, and notably in the Judeo-Christian dialogue, by means of a committee presided over by Rabbi Sirat. Within this scope, we aspire to undertake all that we can in order to extend and intensify this dialogue. In that regard, I thought that a decisive progress could be achieved thanks to study, and by that I mean the study of texts.

I am basing my words on the elementary fact that we have the same foundation, the same common roots, and I cannot help but cite Romans 11:18: "Thou bearest not the root, but the root, thee." But these roots come from a script, the Bible, and it is in the joint study of this script, this text, that I believe a new fraternity can take shape and grow in strength.

After a long period of "quarrels" (the disputes of the Middle Ages), after that of the "dialogue," it is time to turn to the "study." Indeed, a) In quarrel, it is the struggle for opinions that prevails; b) In dialogue—granted, more appeased—one often seeks to convince the other; c) In study, however, one looks for learning, for understanding an issue and understanding each other.

Well, this idea has become a full-grown reality thanks to Shmuel Trigano, the great Jewish scholar, who has devoted himself to these academic gatherings of the School for Jewish Studies. For three years now, and in collaboration with the Catholic Institute of Paris, we have been developing what we call the "Biblical Dialogues" which, two or three times a year, bring together at the Sorbonne hundreds of listeners.

It is thus that, on the same benches, side by side, leaning over the Scriptures that constitute our common heritage, we have examined the
following themes: 1) reading the Bible; 2) the scapegoat mechanism in sociology; 3) the wolf and the lamb; 4) the suffering righteous; 5) Paul and the issue of “the other;” and 6) the sin of Eve.

The enthusiasm that gives rise to these studies and the fervor with which they are pursued testify to the desire that exists in our world to understand one another more fully. In my humble opinion, these biblical dialogues should serve as an example for all people of faith and good will.

Recently two philosophers—one Jewish, Catherine Chalier, and the other Christian, Marc Faessler—have published a commendable book on Judaism and Christianity. Its title is *Judaism and Christianity, a Shared Listening*. It seems to me that hope could also be expressed by the phrase *Judaism and Christianity, a Shared Studying*. Our common goal of standing united in the respect for diversity, this unflagging quest for fraternity, is an essential human task, rooted in knowledge. But, for the concept of shalom to come true, human effort—as necessary a condition as it is—is not enough, hence we must also pray for shalom. A case in point: Jews pray thrice a day in the *shemone esre*, which is the Jewish prayer *par excellence*. After having prayed, in 18 pleas, for the fulfillment of all the blessings that will improve the world—knowledge, the Torah, health, abundance, deliverance, justice, Jerusalem, the Kingdom, and so on—we end with one last plea: “sim shalom,” which means “spread peace.” And since this can only come from above, we add: “May He who establishes peace in the heavens, grant peace unto us.” This is my fervent prayer today.