

A North American in Rome - Reflections on a Journey with the Seminario

*By Matthew Greenberg**

Close to one year has passed since I joined a delegation of rabbis and lay leaders from the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano for a moving and unforgettable journey to Rome. So much has happened in the Jewish world in this year. The war in Ukraine has continued to weigh heavily on our hearts and minds without pause. Jewish communities and organizations worldwide have mobilized to respond with tremendous generosity and care for those who are affected by the war. Sadly, as I write this today, we are now also reeling from the worst attack in Israel in my lifetime and worrying about what the future holds for the Middle East and our own communities here in the Americas. In a way, I'm especially grateful for the opportunity to reflect on my experience with the Seminario in Rome at this time, because it represented something so different: hope, understanding and peace.

Together we encountered many different people and ideas on our journey and the full richness of the experience would be impossible for one person, or one edition of *Maj'shavot*, to describe. Instead, I'll focus on two overarching themes that we engaged with in various settings and how they were reflected at the culmination of our trip during a private audience with Pope Francis.

Abraham Joshua Heschel: Our Companion on the Journey

While the Seminario delegation to Rome was a powerful mission in its own right, it was actually preceded by a year of scholarship and events dedicated to one of the Jewish people's most brilliant contemporary minds – Abraham Joshua Heschel. Prior to the trip, I read a biography of Heschel and a selection of his essential writings (the latter authored by Dr. Susannah Heschel, who we were fortunate to spend time with on our trip). It was my first time reading Heschel and

the inspiration to do so is a great and enduring gift from the Seminario. Rabbi Ernesto Yattah, the vice-chancellor of the Seminario, helped me explore Heschel's ideas described in these books and revealed how they have shaped decades of scholarship and theology at the Seminario through Heschel's dear student, Marshall T. Meyer. I arrived in Rome accompanied by Heschel's words, ready to explore them with a community of Jewish and Catholic scholars of his work.

Throughout our trip I found Heschel in surprising places. On one of our first nights, we had the honor and pleasure of being hosted by María Fernanda Silva, the Ambassador of Argentine to the Holy See, in the cozy embassy near St. Peter's Square. Rather than listing the practical endeavors of her diplomatic mission, she set the stage beautifully for our journey by describing themes of "encounter" and "dialogue." In reflecting on our encounters, both the one we were sharing at that moment and more generally, she noted that so much had to happen for a given moment to come about – all of history, in fact, in some sense leads us to where we are. When you acknowledge the enormity behind each moment you are privileged to experience, you can feel more grateful and dedicate the attention that such a momentous occasion (though it might not feel like it is) deserves. I thought of Heschel's concept of "radical amazement" which challenges me to see the world for what it truly is - the miracle of it - and to approach it as such. Similarly with the theme of "dialogue," Ambassador Silva spoke of how we carry trauma, and argued that for true dialogue to occur, we must be allowed to be who we are, trauma and all. Again, I thought of Heschel, who in his pursuit of dialogue with the Catholic church did not seek to gloss over the difficult aspects of our history, but rather to acknowledge them and build bridges on what shared ground we have left.

Heschel, of course, was present in more obvious ways as well. Most notably, we heard Heschel in the words of many Jewish and Catholic scholars that spoke to us during an academic conference at the Pontifical Gregorian University (the "Gregoriana"), including his daughter, Dr. Susannah Heschel. It was moving for me to see the Catholic faculty of the University wrestling with Heschel's words that were shaped by his Jewish context, but clearly have something to say to people of many faiths. We can all learn from the fact that Heschel's deep roots in Jewish texts didn't cause him to retreat into his own community, but rather to reach out and find others who were pondering the same questions.

Inter-Religious Dialogue: Putting it Into Practice

One of the stated purposes of our delegation, consistent with Heschel's life and work, was to advance Jewish-Catholic dialogue. The Jewish communities of Latin America, as they are part of societies with significant Catholic populations and institutions, are uniquely positioned for this work. I believe we did this in three ways with the Catholics who joined us: by jointly investigating the past, by enjoying time together in the present, and by seeking the shared foundation for a better future.

Regarding the past, we had a chance to reflect on several occasions, together with our hosts at the Gregoriana, on the way that Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament have been admired, or adamantly rejected and discredited, by Christian scholars over time. It was an interesting framework in which to discuss interreligious dialogue – as we engage in this conversation today, how did these interactions look in the past as reflected in religious debate? What can we learn from where our predecessors have fallen short? Later in the week we had the opportunity to visit the Ardeatine Caves, site of a WWII era massacre, together with diplomatic representatives of Argentina and Chile. We heard from descendants of those killed there and together recited the Mourner's Kaddish in their memory. For our honored guests, it was an opportunity to see and understand the deep impact of the Holocaust on Jewish people, including those separated from it by time and geography.

As for the present, our journey was full of wonderful meals of delicious Italian food shared in good company. We spent time getting to know Catholic academics, priests and nuns, non-Jewish friends of the Seminario and many others, each of whom informed our understanding of the Catholic faith. We were all candid about the challenges facing each of our communities.

In terms of the future, a significant amount of our time in meetings was spent discussing practical ways in which the Seminario and its supporters can work with other communities of faith to 1) tackle issues of social justice and inequality in Latin America and abroad and 2) advance interreligious dialogue and understanding. In each setting, the leadership of the Seminario offered practical suggestions

for the role that the institution could play in these efforts. In the year since, continued collaboration between the Seminario and some of those we met in Rome has already shown that these shared endeavors can bear fruit.

Meeting the Pope

At the conclusion of our visit to Rome it was time for our much-anticipated audience with Pope Francis. As I look back on the experience, I realize that Pope Francis, in his personality and remarks to our group, powerfully brought together the central themes and experiences of our trip that I've described above. He was serious, joyful, pained and hopeful, and above all else, welcoming.

The Pope also spoke to our collective past, present and future. Rabbi Ariel Stofenmacher delivered opening remarks on behalf of the Seminario, and in them he noted the deep mark that had been left on his family by the Holocaust. Pope Francis responded unequivocally: "It was a crime from which there is no way back." With part of our complicated history acknowledged, we could move forward into authentic dialogue and encounter. In the present, Pope Francis spoke with great passion about the sadness he feels in the face of the conflict in Ukraine. Through my involvement with Jewish nonprofit organizations, I have witnessed the terrible suffering inflicted by the war in Ukraine and I was moved by how deeply felt the Pope's sentiments were on this topic. Turning to our future, the Pope presented a vision of faith (not one specific faith – not Christianity or Judaism – but any authentic faith) as something that drives us to service, which in turn strengthens our faith. It was a beautiful vision of a shared path that we can walk on together with people of all religions and backgrounds in service of a better future for all of us.

On that journey of interreligious cooperation, we can all take a lesson from the way Pope Francis responded when the Seminario delegation presented him with a Shofar. He asked what it was, looked it over and then tried in vain to get it to make a sound. The Seminario rabbis didn't have an easy time with it either, but ultimately, our mixed Catholic-Jewish group in attendance at the audience stood together and heard the sound of the Shofar. I will never forget that moment. Beautiful

things are possible if we follow the Pope's example by approaching other traditions with curiosity, openness and a healthy dose of humor.

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