

## What the Rabbi Taught the Reverend about the Baby Jesus

*Gregory Mobley*

Rabbinic Judaism, especially as vocalized in the mystical keys of Kabbalah and Hasidism, develops the theme of a vulnerable God who enlists Israel's support in *tikkun olam*, the redemption of creation and Creator. Christian discourse is full of the former theme—moral exhortation focused on saving souls or the world—but shies away from the latter. Sure we have the magnificent Philippian hymn (Phil 2:6–11) and in the past half-century scores of portraits of a battered, suffering God who, like an earnest therapist with poor boundaries, overidentifies with creation's pain. But we don't talk much or at all in Christian circles about the church's, or humanity's, responsibility to restore and replenish the divine fullness. In most European Christian theology, developed by folks whose ethnic kin exercised a measure of control over culture, and for the theologies transplanted east and west and south of Europe by its missionaries and migrants, God is on the throne, august, omni-everything. We do not often follow up on the full implications of the analogy of the church as Christ's body, that the health and vitality of Head and Body are interrelated. That God needs us as much as we need God.

But I had become so taken with this idea in Jewish theology of the dynamic mutual interdependence of Creator and creation. It had both a poetry and a physics to it that rang true. I searched for a Christian expression of this theme, however faint. But I wasn't finding it.

Then I consulted with a rabbi, Rim Meiowitz of Temple Shir Tikvah in Winchester, Massachusetts. I explained my dilemma to Rabbi Rim, that I was frustrated in my attempt to find a Christian expression of *tikkun olam*. Now Rim knows a thing or two about Christianity and Christians. Although he lives in Newton, a town in the Torah Belt just west of Brookline, his congregation in Winchester includes many interfaith families.

Rim asked me, "Don't you guys talk about the need to nurture and care for the baby Jesus?"

It had been right in front of me all my life in every crèche and in every Christmas Eve recitation of Luke's infancy narrative. It takes a village to raise a Savior. The baby Jesus required protection, nurture, and both tender and fierce loving care from a host of human characters, especially Mary and Joseph. So why then, my entire life, too much—perhaps—of it spent in church, have I never heard about our need to nurture God? There it is, right in front of us: a neglected theme of Christian theology that only emerged for me through interfaith learning. God needs our ministrations of love and liturgy, for heaven's sake, not just the world's.

Once we hear from Jewish teachers and sources about the G\*d who suffered a primeval fragmentation known as the "Shattering of the Vessels" (*Shevirat Ha-Kelim*), once we hear the teachings of Isaac Luria from sixteenth-century Safed about how G\*d seeks our help in mending a broken world through returning the fragments of light, one deed of virtue and worship at a time, to the Light of Lights: Can we not see this theme in our tradition?

Judaism and Christianity are siblings, each the child of Second Temple Judahite religion and a grandchild of the faith of biblical Israel. Like biological twins seeking differentiation, each community in the process of individuation preserved special configurations of a common heritage that the other group lost or de-emphasized. Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University comments on the Apostle Paul's metaphor of the olive tree and its branches in Romans 11 in her book *The Misunderstood Jew* (2006): "Had the church remained a Jewish sect, it would not have achieved its universal mission. Had Judaism given up its particularistic practices, it would have vanished

from history. That the two movements eventually separated made possible the preservation of each.”

Has the world changed all that much since those first centuries of the Common Era when Christians and Jews differentiated in polemical ways? When New Testament texts such as John 19:38–40 and 19:13–16 accused Jews of responsibility for crucifying Jesus? When Talmudic texts like B.T. Shabbat 104b accused Mary of infidelity and Jesus of illegitimacy? In many places, Jewish culture remains vulnerable, and productive dialogue can take place only in an environment of trust. But where we can trust each other, and the campus in Newton, Massachusetts, shared by Hebrew College and Andover Newton Theological School seems to be such a place, Jews and Christians can find the lost themes of our respective faiths by talking to each other.

Interfaith dialogue, then, is its own kind of *tikkun* as we recover the lost fragments of our respective faiths that the sibling preserved, initially for themselves, but also, as it turns out, for the Other too.

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# **My Neighbor's Faith**

*Stories of Interreligious Encounter,  
Growth, and Transformation*

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2012

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545