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Rooting the Dialogue in Jewish Tradition.

I thought it would be helpful to introduce some aspects of Jewish teaching into our conference. To do so I want to discuss a famous verse from the Hebrew Bible, from the Book of Leviticus, (19:18), a verse that is probably best known from its use in Christianity. The Hebrew phrase is '*v'ahavta l'rei'echa kamocha*', and is usually translated as 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself'. But there are problems with this translation. You cannot command 'love', and the word for neighbour in this sentence is not the direct object of the verb but the indirect object. So it means something like, 'you should act in a loving way towards your neighbour'. As the rabbis explained: 'you should wish for your neighbour what you would wish for yourself.'

The word '*kamocha*', 'as yourself', stands alone in the sentence, so another way to understand it is 'who is like you' – which reinforces our sense of identification with the 'neighbour'.

But who is the neighbour intended by the sentence? In the Biblical context in Leviticus it is clearly your fellow Israelite, someone belonging to your own Jewish nation and people. It is not universal, even though it is often understood in this way. But a few verses later in the same chapter, the Bible speaks about the 'stranger who lives amongst you'. You must not oppress him, and then comes almost the identical phrase that we have just seen (Leviticus 19:34), but now 'neighbour' is replaced by 'him', the stranger: '*v'ahavta lo kamocha*', 'you shall love him as yourself'. The Torah acknowledges that we see the world in terms of 'we' and 'they', of 'our own' and 'others', but we have to treat both groups, each person, with the same attitude of love, compassion and care. It is a powerful, but challenging, teaching.

In our conference we have learnt about many examples of how that love is expressed in the work that people here have done. But let me mention three things that follow from the Biblical teaching which relate to our dialogue.

'*kamocha*' – 'who is like you'. To love someone as ourselves means to accept them, warts and all – just as we have to accept ourselves with our own strengths and weaknesses, our mistakes and failures, our frustrations or anger. So some degree of self-criticism, of honesty about our own prejudices and insensitivities, our own needs and limitations, has to be part of our work of dialogue, our own self-reflection.

'*v'ahavta*' – 'you shall act in a loving way'. Dialogue is a very delicate instrument. At its best it is an end in itself: the process of encountering the other, of seeing the world and ourselves through the eyes of the other, of having the humility to try to change as a result of what we have learnt – these are a major part of the achievement of dialogue. The more we try to instrumentalise dialogue, to use it for some other purpose, such as for political reasons, the greater the risk that it will be damaged or corrupted. That is a hard teaching, but we need to check repeatedly what we are doing and remind ourselves of our motivation.

'*l'rei'echa*' 'your neighbour'. Our neighbour, in the global village, is more likely to belong to a different 'we' than just our own particular people or religious community. But we still identify ourselves as Jews or Muslims and therefore must bear in mind our

radically new situation. In the past we defined ourselves in contrast to, even in opposition to, one another. Today we have to re-define ourselves in relationship to one another – and that means radically rethinking almost all our traditions, beliefs and assumptions. Dialogue today is part of a revolution in which we are playing a significant part.