True dialogue between leaders of different religions is difficult to accomplish. Heart to heart discussions, where each side listens to and engages with the other, are rare. Interaction between religions usually appears like a court trial where each side presents such different views of a situation that they seem not to address the same incident.

A good example of this is the Jewish response to Pope Benedict XVI's recent attempt to heal the schism within the Catholic Church created by the St. Pius X Society last century. The Pope revoked the excommunication of the four bishops who lead this society. Unfortunately, one bishop has vocally denied the Holocaust, so Jews are understandably upset.

Jewish leaders interpreted this as a slap in the face to Jewish-Christian relations, and Israeli leaders may cancel the Pope's coming visit to Israel. It seems the Pope was so intent on healing the schism that he failed to foresee his action's broader impact. Nevertheless, these unintended consequences may give this Pope a reputation as insensitive to Judaism.

This would be unfortunate because Pope Benedict has interacted with Judaism in a way no pope has done before, to my knowledge. He has publically, and in print, stated that he has learned from a Jewish rabbi about Jesus. He, in fact, uses that rabbi's understanding of Jesus to construct his own portrait of Jesus. This portrait appears in the Pope's 2007 book, "Jesus of Nazareth," which he calls his "personal search for the face of the Lord." The rabbi is the prolific scholar Jacob Neusner. The book is his thoughtful and imaginative work, "A Rabbi Talks with Jesus" (1993, 2000).

Benedict builds on Neusner's important point that the Jews -- the people Israel -- became a unified community when God appeared on Mount Sinai and formed a covenant with them. He became their God and they became his people, a bond guided by the Torah (which the Greek-speaking Christians later mistranslated as "law"). This Torah forms the foundation of Judaism and maintains the relationship between God and the people Israel.

As the Pope draws from Neusner's book, he follows Neusner in seeing that Judaism's Torah helps Jesus present his message. In Matthew's sermon on the Mount, for instance, Neusner understands the beatitudes as restating the message of the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament) about concern and caring for the poor and downtrodden. Indeed, much of the sermon makes sense within and even extends the divine principles given in the Torah.

But it is Neusner's insistence that the Jews' allegiance to God's Torah prevents them from accepting Jesus' message for themselves that the Pope finds most illuminating. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus' first significant public speech is the sermon on the Mount. The setting is important because just as God gave the Torah on Mount Sinai, Jesus presents himself on the mountain. Through his words, Jesus presents himself as the new Torah, as God's replacement message.

The sermon's contents are key. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said... You shall not kill... But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable." Notice how this works. In the saying's first half, Jesus states the Torah. In the second half, beginning with "I say to you," he replaces the Torah with his own dictum. He accomplishes this not by logic, precedent or argument, but through his own authority. Jesus makes this kind of statement many times in the sermon. Each time he begins with Torah and then replaces it through his own authority.

Pope Benedict applauds Neusner for this precise insight. Jews cannot become Christians because their relationship to God depends on the Torah. To follow Jesus is to believe Jesus' claim that he himself replaces the Torah. For Jews, to deny the Torah is to deny God.

In the beginning of his book, Rabbi Neusner invited Jews and Christians to join him in his attempt at cross-religion conversation, noting "we can enter into dialogue only if we honor both ourselves and the other." It is an important insight into Pope Benedict's key beliefs that he publically joined Neusner in dialogue, giving honor to Neusner's Jewish insights while never forsaking his own.

(Editor's note: The writer of this column is Rabbi Dr. Neusner's last doctoral student. His lessons in religious knowledge, analysis and understanding are being taught to the students at the University of Wyoming).