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Raphael Schutz, the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, speaks with Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, the Vatican's foreign minister, during a reception June 6 at the Jewish Museum of Rome. (CNS/courtesy of the Israeli Embassy to the Holy See)

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The Oct. 7 terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's massive military response in Gaza have led to strong papal pleas for peace but also to Vatican-Israeli diplomatic tensions.

At a concert and reception June 6, Raphael Schutz, the Israeli ambassador to the Holy See, told guests, "It is no secret that after Oct. 7, at some junctions, Israel and the Holy See have not seen eye to eye the same reality in the Middle East. In such moments, as well as during my 41 years as a diplomat, I've believed that being frank and speaking clearly was no opposite to being diplomatic."

Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, the Vatican foreign minister, told the ambassador and his guests, "In conflicts, the Holy See must adhere to the principle of neutrality, which does not mean being morally indifferent."

"In fact," he continued, "the Holy See does not close its doors to anyone and strives to understand everyone's motivations and perspectives. In this regard, it is very much appreciated when the positions of one's own authorities are timely presented through the appropriate diplomatic forum and channels. Indeed, diplomatic relations with the Holy See are precisely bilateral diplomatic relations and not just a matter of public diplomacy."

The comments, during the event at the Jewish Museum of Rome, reminded the audience of two incidents in particular: Pope Francis describing the ongoing conflict as "terrorism" in remarks Nov. 22, and Schutz responding indirectly at a news conference the same day. And, more recently, Schutz publishing in a Rome newspaper a rebuttal to an article in L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, which argued that criticizing Zionism is not the same as being antisemitic.

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The event at the museum was a delayed commemoration of the 76th anniversary of Israel's declaration of independence. It also coincided with the 30th anniversary of the Vatican and Israel launching formal diplomatic relations and with the 10th anniversary of Francis and Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople praying for peace in the Holy Land with Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the Vatican Gardens.

The commemoration included prayers for peace and a long musical program composed mainly of liturgical songs in Hebrew performed by the choir of Rome's main synagogue.

Schutz told his guests, "October 7 has been the worst day in these 76 years. The 1,400 Israelis that were massacred that day, not only were the highest number of Jews killed in one day since the Holocaust, but the brutality of the crime, its horrendous nature and all details that were related to it made the Israeli collective mind inevitably jump back to a past of pogroms and persecutions."

When he arrived in Rome, he said, he was hoping Israel and the Holy See could work together exploring and promoting how Francis' teaching on the environment and on human fraternity coincided with "the Jewish concept of 'tikkun olam,' repairing the world."

The ambassador said he hoped that still would be possible, but "it seems to me that in the short run, some healing process is needed and before we move forward, we may need to discuss some basics. Maybe the 60th anniversary next year of 'Nostra Aetate,' (the Second Vatican Council document that launched a new era of Catholic respect for the Jews and for Judaism) can serve us as a conceptual framework for this process."

Gallagher noted that in his document officially announcing the Holy Year 2025, "Pope Francis wrote, 'The need for peace challenges us all and demands that concrete steps be taken. May diplomacy be tireless in its commitment to seek with courage and creativity every opportunity to undertake negotiations aimed at everlasting peace.'"

"This is my hope and wish for the state of Israel and its neighbors," the archbishop said: "Peace, shalom, salaam."