

## **Torah is the Way (by Fr. Antoine Levy)**

Jewish existence is buttressed by the concept of Torah. But what is Torah? According to one of its possible etymologies, Torah is a way, a path. But what way? By referring to the Law that G-d gave Moses, as the Pentateuch spells it out, it says both everything and nothing, a rejoinder which is usually rather puzzling to Christian theologians and exegetes. Admittedly, what a Palestinian Jew living in the days of Jesus, a Jew of 12<sup>th</sup> century France and a 20<sup>th</sup> century Brooklyn Chabad-Lubavitcher meant or mean when referring to the content of Torah is quite different, although they all would refer to the teaching that Moses received from G-d.

That Torah is not a dead notion, but a dynamic spiritual force implies that it not only has the ability, but also the duty to adjust to situations which are continuously changing. The variety of foreign lifestyles always raises new questions. Simultaneously, the metamorphosis of inner Jewish paradigms, as to whether one lives in the Land or in exile, whether there is a Temple or not, whether the Messiah has come or is still to be expected, is the hermeneutical principle that produces new answers to these questions. While the answers given within the tradition may substantially diverge among themselves, thus giving rise to new questions and still more divergences, what guarantees the coherence of the whole tradition is the common agreement that there is an ultimate criterion of validity, and that this criterion is faithfulness to the divine teaching expounded by Moses in the five books of the Torah.

If this is what Torah is about and if Torah is what authenticates Jewish existence, it is hard to see how a number of disciples of Christ could claim a Jewish identity without somehow integrating *this* notion of Torah into their religious world. The question that arises is not only whether this is possible, but whether this is *überhaupt* desirable. Can one be really faithful to Christ while partially or totally adopting a heritage which has developed on the premise that Jesus was not the awaited Messiah of Israel? Do these Jewish disciples of Christ not condemn themselves to being neither really Christians, due to their pledge to Jewish ways of thinking and behaving, nor really Jewish, due to their faith in Christ? *A contrario*, if this integration was theologically desirable, how could it take place without Torah losing its Jewish specificity and becoming part of the tradition of the whole Body of Christ, Gentiles and Jews alike?

One clearly sees, here, the dilemma which lies behind this issue. On the one hand, the integration of Torah reinforces a distinction between Jewish and Gentile followers of Yeshua - otherwise it is devoid of meaning. On the other hand, this integration should contribute to building the unity and communion within the Body of Christ – otherwise, it would not be according to the will of God, which is the shaping of a people of his own, equally composed of Jews and Gentiles. Ultimately, we are led back to the basic theological challenge of the Consultation: how -on what conditions- can an element of differentiation become a principle of communion?

I will attempt to show that the Messianic integration of Torah effectively outlines a Jewish mode of discipleship. In order to do that, I will first argue that non-integration derives from a concept of Torah which, because it is the product of non-Jewish Christian traditions, misses the point of the Jewish

notion of Torah. Next, I will explain, on the basis of a concrete example, why I see this integration as a source both of differentiation and of communion in the Body of the Messiah.

# **1. Integration or disintegration? Torah and the newness of the Gospel according to traditional Christian theology**

There is no denying that Yeshua openly challenged the various ways in which the Jews of his time understood Torah and practiced it. While being Torah-observant and eager to uphold the Law given to Moses (Mt 5, 17-18, Lk 16, 17), Christ was intent on doing so by renewing its interpretation on his own authority (Mt 5, 21-22). Among other issues, his radical teaching touched upon marriage (Mat 5. 27-28, Mat 19, 3-9), retaliation (John 18, 22-23), Shabbat observance (Mat.12. 1-13) and purity rituals (Mat.15, 1-6). Moreover, he established sacred rites (Baptism, Eucharist) that present a character of utter novelty compared with the elements of the tradition prior to him. To summarize, one could say that the teaching of Yeshua unveiled a radically new dimension of Torah, a dimension which was intimately associated with what he was and what he did.

There is no denying either that the writings of the immediate disciples of Christ, especially those of Shaul-Paul, included in what has been called the New Testament, shift the core of true discipleship from Torah to the teaching, and most especially, the life of Yeshua. Everything, including the Torah, flows from the kerygma, the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, as revealing the ultimate purpose of the universe's coming into existence as well as Israel's holy history.

The destruction of Jerusalem's Temple at the hand of the Romans, in the year 70, marks the first stage in a transformation process that would bring about a new, full-fledged religion, with a life of its own. Once gone, the center of Jewish life, Messianic discipleship had no other option than to rely on its own legacy to promote a concrete canon of belief and conduct. The disappearance of the Temple, the end of the hopes of restoration that the Bar Kokhba revolt had generated, could only have been viewed as signs that the time had come to transcribe the newness of the Gospel into a way of life that would freely break away from old Torah observances.

It is during the Patristic era, in a context of rivalry between Christian and Jewish communities, that Christian theologians and preachers started demonizing Torah-observance to establish the superiority of Christian faith. In actual fact, by the beginning of the fourth century, there was hardly anything left of a recognizable Judeo-Christian element within the Church. In this context, Torah-observance, identified with subservience to the Letter, appeared to be what was left when one had rejected the freedom of the Spirit that coincided with faith in Christ. Mixing Christian convictions with a Jewish lifestyle became a felony in the context of Church law (Council of Elvira, 305).

Here lies the origin of the split status devolved on Torah in the subsequent Christian tradition. On the one hand, since G-d cannot contradict Himself, Torah is integrated as a part of the Christian heritage. First, it is part of Christian history or rather of its prehistory, as it describes the customs and rites, henceforth abolished, that foreshadowed the advent of universal Redemption. At most, the episodes from Jewish history become metaphors of what Christian life is about. Then, in the mode of the Ten Commandments, Torah remains an element of the

Church's actual and perennial teaching, as some sort of elementary ethics. However, the new Law; that is, the Law of Christ, encompasses this Torah, just as what is perfect encompasses what is not, or as a circle defines the limit that no set of differential equations will ever be able to reach, even when tending towards infinity.

On the other hand, as practiced by Jews, Torah-observance stands clearly beyond the boundaries of Christianity, as foreign to the economy of Salvation. Without faith in Christ, elementary ethics cannot save and all other remaining statutes are looked upon as a set of idiosyncratic and henceforth irrelevant customs. Obviously, this medieval model of Torah-integration, as classically expounded by Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> c., does not leave any room for Jewish identity. Either a Jew sticks to the "good Torah", so as not to differ in anything from all Gentile Christians, or a Jew practices the "bad Torah", thus excluding him/herself from the people of G-d .

With M. Luther, I believe that one witnesses the emergence of a slightly different model of Torah-integration. Torah-observance is no longer seen as an external, but as an internal threat to Christian faith. Disconnected from strict adherence to the Law of Moses, identified with a sort of quintessential Jewish spirit and thus pointed out as naturally loathsome, Torah-observance now designates the perpetual risk of faith sliding towards a caricature of itself, giving up the Spirit that makes free in order to come back to the fetters of the Letter. From this point of view, the perfect representatives of the Jewish Spirit are Papists-Catholics, who swapped the gratuity of Christ's justification for a system of good actions and rewards: "When we consider the obstinacy with which

Romanists cling to their traditions, we can very well understand the zealous devotion of the Jews for the Law.”<sup>1</sup>

Taken in this broad sense, Torah-observance is simply the opposite of true faith, so that reflecting on the possible integration of Torah, in the strict Jewish sense of the term, into Christianity can have no other meaning than that of definitively doing away with being a disciple of Christ. Here, I cannot help thinking about the inconsistency that assails in the language of many Jewish-Christian missionary groups. On the one hand, there is considerable emphasis on the importance of Jewish identity and Church membership for Jews. On the other hand, what Jews hear after joining these movements sounds very much like: “Wonderful, now you are a new creature, free from the burden of the Law!”. Jewishness is praised as long as its main element -Torah faithfulness- is dismissed, with the consequence that the only good Jew is a Jew who has become a Gentile like all the other members of the congregation. This is at least a strange way of emphasizing the importance of Jewishness for the whole community! I regret to say that I ascribe the paternity of these inconsistencies to Luther’s way of theologizing anti-Semitism.

To summarize, Christian traditions did not find any other way to integrate the notion of Torah than to disintegrate the Jewish identity that was originally associated with it. Still, Jews never ceased to claim that Torah lay at the very core of their existence. Reflecting on Torah and living according to the Torah is what assured the survival of the people of Israel as a distinct people among the nations, even after the Temple was destroyed and in the complete absence of

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians (1535), Translated by T. Graebner (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1949), Chapter 2, v,1 pp. 44-48.

political autonomy. The question that arises is whether Christians viewed this Jewish Torah, existing and developing beyond the boundaries of their Church, as a "bad Torah" because it was effectively incompatible with their faith or because the very fact of Jewish survival was unilaterally interpreted as a disavowal of this faith. In other words, is the reason that explains the Christian denial of Torah's Jewish dimension something other than the symmetrical rejection of Christian faith by traditional Judaism? This is the point I would like to take up now, which I will do by going back to the origins of the rabbinic notion of Torah.

## **2. The resilience of Torah – Jewish existence as the crucial blind spot of historical Christianity**

That Torah in and by itself, independently of Christ's message of salvation, would still retain some hermeneutic fecundity; that it might still constitute a light on the path of mankind, producing new theological, ethical as well as mystical insights, is a hypothesis which has never been seriously reflected upon in traditional Christian theology. Indeed, how could some truth emerge in an ambience foreign to the recognition of the Truth made man, as granting access to the ultimate mysteries of God's inner existence? Certainly, even from a Christian point of view, the fact of not accepting the absolute Truth should not diminish the fecundity of the partial truth which has been previously received. However, what new truth could emerge from a partial truth that would not already be encompassed in the absolute one? In actual fact, this is impossible, except relatively speaking. Imagine someone who has a body of knowledge at his disposal, a body so extended and so refined, that he cannot but wrongly assume that he is able to distinguish all the elements contained in it. He does not see

what he sees. At some point, he may be corrected by someone who, although being ignorant of the whole picture, has a better understanding of some particular - a particular that could actually prove crucial to the understanding of the whole picture. The first sees the whole picture without being able to grasp one of its most remarkable details. The second clearly sees this remarkable detail, but is not granted access to the whole picture. As to this element which is seen without being really seen, it could rightly be defined as a blind spot. I believe it is fair to say that rabbinic Judaism dwells in a crucial blind spot of historical Christianity. Let me explain what I have in mind.

Rabbinic Judaism is rooted in the belief and the intuition that the destruction of the Temple would not prevent Torah from continuing to be the living source of Jewish existence. What the rabbis gathered at Yavné in 90 CE, as well as their followers in successive generations, understood is that this continuity would come at the price of a radical reorientation of Torah's hermeneutics. Having lost the hope that Gentiles would receive G-d's Torah otherwise than in its paganized Christian version, these Jews started identifying their mission as that of drawing from their understanding of the Torah the practical and theological means that would prevent Jewish existence from dissolving in an endlessly hostile environment. From the existence of the Temple and the performance of sacred rites, Torah hermeneutics would shift its focus to their disappearance. It would place the longing for the Temple at the very heart of Jewish lifestyle, reflection and prayer. The purpose of this Jewish Torah thus lay in spelling out the multifarious ways, be they social or worship rules, in which Jews would continue to glorify the Name of the Creator in the most adequate manner. These rules were meant to be Israel's loving and concrete response to



the choice that G-d himself had made of Israel, as sealed through the gift of the Torah. Regarding the reflection which brought forth these religious duties, *mitsvot*, as a consequence of a thorough and continuously renewed discussion, *Torah-shebal-peh*, on the content of the written Torah, *Torah-she-biktav*, it emerged as the primary and most fundamental mode of Jewish response to God's irrevocable choice of Israel.

In this sense, the driving force of Jewish Torah is not an opposition to Christ, but an opposition to historical Christianity or to the Christian Church, seen as implying some definite ignorance or dismissal of the unique relationship existing between Jews and G-d. From the perspective of historical Christianity, the new and ultimate Covenant sealed on the Cross had simply replaced the First, the one that went back to the Revelation on Mount Sinai. By contrast, Rabbinic Judaism claimed that it could continue to draw the living substance of its tradition from G-d's faithfulness to His first Covenant, just as historical Christianity could claim to draw its own from the mystery of Christ's life, death and resurrection. As a result, two autonomous and rival systems of belief, conduct and worship grew out of a common original Torah-root: the Jewish and the Christian, which came to designate an entity quasi-exclusively composed of Gentile believers. From the point of view of their fundamental values, such as piety, honesty, holiness, etc., the two systems had a great deal in common, which is not surprising, since they both derived from an identical root. However, the split regarding the identity of the Messiah that had originally happened within Israel gradually brought about two mutually exclusive ways of substantiating these values in the existence of the faithful. While the first developed a system of worship and morals based on the concept of human being

as such, thus overlooking the distinction between Jews and non-Jews, the second developed a culture of *mitsvot* or practical religious duties that fell upon Jews, thus drawing a firm boundary between Jews and all other nations.

To belittle the Jewish Torah and prove the superiority of Christian faith, its character of perfection compared to the inchoate character of its rival, late Antiquity and Medieval theologians found it easy to point to the elements missing in the Jewish tradition, such as sacraments, monastic life, stringent commandments regarding marriage, etc. However, from a Jewish point of view, it is not much more difficult to point out the shortcomings of a system which claims to be perfect. What about sins, what about the proliferation of hatred and its lethal consequences within the Christian realm? Being less ambitious in their dogmatic claims as well as their moral aims, observant Jews have often managed to avoid falling into the same pitfalls as their Christian counterparts. Moreover, Jews were the first victims of the distance between the religious ideal of Christians and their concrete behavior. There is probably little need to explain why Christ's perfect law of love is not adequately reflected in the persecutions that, in its name, have devastated, throughout the centuries, communities whose only crime was to be Jewish. Indeed, as V. Soloviev pointed out, the "bad Torah" which developed beyond the boundaries of historical Christianity often seems to partake of a divine Truth, of a kinship with the message of Christ, which is missing within its boundaries.

Let us, therefore, formulate the question once again: how is this possible, if Christian faith is, as it claims to be, the revelation of absolute truth? As I hinted above, it is one thing to be granted access to absolute Truth, another thing to be able to understand what this Truth contains. I believe that historical

Christianity, has accepted, without even noticing it, a premise that has, until a very recently, distorted its access to absolute Truth. That premise is the dismissal of the privileged and irrevocable character of the relationship that binds G-d. and the Jewish nation together, seen as a consequence of the universal Salvation proclaimed in the name of Christ. This is what I call the blind spot of historical Christianity. It has equated the fullness of revelation of the Torah in Christ with a uniform concept of redeemed mankind. True, the Salvation of Christ goes beyond the distinction between Jews and non-Jews; it abolishes the wall of hatred as it reverses the consequences of Adam's fall. However, suppressing the poisonous side-effects of the distinction between Jews and non-Jews does not mean suppressing the distinction itself, just as healing the violence that wounds the relationship between men and women does not mean suppressing their distinction.

Accordingly, in a configuration where the essence of Jewish identity was denied, the rejection of Christ as the incarnated Son of God appears as a providential circumstance without which the Jewish calling would have simply disappeared from the face of the earth. If, therefore, what lies at the core of Jewish Torah is not the rejection of Christ, but the striving to maintain this unique relationship to G-d which forms the essence of Jewishness, what could prevent Jewish Torah, once the misleading premise is checked and discarded, from becoming integral to the Body of the Messiah? There is nothing indeed, except the Jewish rejection of Yeshua's messiahship, which is precisely no hindrance to Messianic Jews. It is therefore worth examining more closely what such an incorporation would entail.

### 3. The recovery of Torah

When I speak about Jewish Torah becoming integral to the Body of Yeshua, as the whole which *simultaneously* comprehends Jewish and Gentile disciples of Christ, I do not mean that it would become the lot of all of them *equally*. What sense could it possibly make for Gentiles to celebrate, through the observance of a set of social and worship rules, the relationship that binds Jews and G-d as if it were their own? Yet if this dimension went lost, one could no longer speak of the reception of a Jewish Torah, as it has been carried forth by successive generations of Jews from the time of the destruction of the Temple until our days. If the Torah of Jewish exile were to be adopted by Gentile and Jewish disciples of Christ alike, it would know exactly the same fate as the Old Testament within historical Christianity: not an equal sharing, but a process of "Gentilization" gradually squeezing Jewish consciousness out of the Body of Christ. Quite on the contrary, the reception of Jewish Torah is about granting, for the first time in the history of Christianity, a space to the Jewish disciples of Christ *qua* Jews within the Body of Christ. Is it not high time such an event occurred? Is it not, indeed, to Jews that Christ was primarily sent? In the prologue to his Gospel, John writes of the eternal Word of G-d that he came to his own, εἰς τὰ ἴδια (1:11), knowing perfectly that, in Greek, οἱ ἴδιοι, evokes those who are "relatives, next of kin". As he seems to shun granting the request of a Canaanite woman, Christ says of himself that he has "not been sent but to (οὐκ ἀπεστάλην εἰ μὴ εἰς) the lost sheep of Israel" (Mat. 15.24). For sure, in their majority, "his own did not receive him", as John's Prologue continues. However, a few did. It is for them, but also for those of them who would join later on, until

the final reconciliation of the whole Israel (Rom.11, 15), that Paul keeps repeating that Jews are the first to be called to the new realm, while the Gentiles only come second (Rom.3,29; 9, 24; I Cor1, 24, etc.)

In this configuration, Torah would not be taken as a spiritual metaphor or integrated into a general system of morals. It would continue to be taken literally, so to say, as a divine source of inspiration from which the concrete behavior and religious universe of Jews should draw. Of course, one could reverse the question and ask: what meaning would there be in Jews keeping to “their Law” within the Body of Christ? This is, indeed, the touchstone question that can be asked, because it goes to the very heart of the issue. The first thing to say, however, is that, as it is, the question is absurd, *sinnlose*. In this configuration, there is no “keeping to the Law”. If Jews are in the Body of Christ; that is, if they are disciples of Christ, what has been hitherto considered as being the Jewish Torah, *Torah-shebiktav* and *Torah shebalpeh* as an undivided whole, is to undergo a dramatic process of inner transformation. However, this does not mean that this Jewish Torah would become less Jewish for all that. On the contrary, it is destined to become more Jewish. The goal is to experience what happens to Israel when it comes to the recognition of Yeshua as its Messiah. I underline Israel *as it is*. Too often, the Messianic movement gives the impression of being willing to go back in time and rewrite history. However, as Aquinas says, even God cannot decree that what happened did not happen. And it is much more interesting that way, if I may add. On the one hand, present-day Jews are not the Jews of the time of Jesus. Judaism is not either. Present-day Jews are what their ancestors have gone through and achieved during a little less than two thousand years of *Galut*. They have, methinks, a sufficient number of

reasons to be proud of this history. On the other hand, their Messiah is no longer present in the way he was during his life as an ordinary -so to say- human being, 2000 years ago. Their Messiah is now invisibly, but forcefully present as the one who once died but rose to a life which is no longer limited by death. As they welcome Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel, present-day Jews freely, without any external pressure, take upon themselves the fault of their forefathers. As a consequence, they come to experience the liberating grace that flows from their risen Messiah. Let us hear again Peter, our Jewish brother, talk to the elders and rulers of Israel in the Acts of the Apostles:

“If you are questioning us today about an act of kindness to a cripple and asking us how he was healed,

10 you must know, *all of you, and the whole people of Israel*, that it is by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, *whom you crucified*, and God raised from the dead, by this name and by no other that this man stands before you cured.

11 This is the stone which you, the builders, rejected but which has become the cornerstone. Only in him is there salvation;

12 for of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved.” (Acts 4:8-12 NJB)

For a present-day Jew, welcoming Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel, and therefore the one in whom the fullness of Torah is revealed, should not mean delving into a system of worship and moral values foreign to what 2000 years of Jewish tradition have produced. Rather, it should be about experiencing the new and unheard of closeness to God that stems from letting the Messiah’s grace bring the Jewish system of worship and values, the Jewish Torah, to its accomplishment. Since the Jewish tradition does provide an access to the divine

wisdom hidden in the *Torah-bi-ktav*, its system of practice cannot avoid receiving some decisive and ultimate light from the recognition of Yeshua as the eternal wisdom of the Father. If G-d has something radically specific to tell Jews as Jews, it is because Jews, with all their limits and sinfulness, are led to ask Him questions that only Jews can and should ask Him. From this point of view, the acceptance of Yeshua as Israel's Messiah features a new and ultimate paradigm in the Torah understanding that has seen the light throughout two thousand years of Jewish exile. The disappearance of the Temple once became the key that opened up secrets remained unseen during the time of the Temple's existence. One can reasonably expect from the discovery of the Temple that no human hand has rebuilt that it will open up secrets that remained unnoticed during the time of Israel's exile.

After all, the transformation I am describing bears a definite resemblance to that which took place in the Greek cultural world in the early period of Church history. Then, the fruit of the ancient philosophical reflection on moral values came to be received, adjusted and vitally supplemented by the content of the Christian revelation. The grace of Christ appeared as the only means that could ever make the Greek striving after the good and the beautiful, *kalokagathos*, reach its goal. Just as the theology of the early Church found in Christ the accomplishment of Greek philosophy, Messianic theology should be committed to manifesting in what manner Yeshua is the accomplishment of the Jewish Torah. As Paul claims in the epistle to the Galatians, Torah alone, or dissociated from the Messiah, cannot save. But the Messianic Torah of Yeshua can.

Accordingly, the possibility of Jews being granted a space of their own within the Body of Christ rests on the reception of the Jewish Torah, as reflecting

the specific and everlasting bond between God and Israel. The fact that Jews will be able to keep their Torah does not mean, however, that their Torah will essentially differ from the Torah of the rest of the Church. The Jewish Torah will be anchored in the mystery of Christ's life, death and resurrection, exactly like the discipline of the rest of the Church. The Jewish Torah is the Jewish path to the one and unique divine life that animates the whole Body. Analogically, the ways Maronite Christians worship G-d is different from the ways Latin Catholics do. However, both communities share in the life of the same undivided Church. Communion rests on distinction, understood as the opposite of uniformity.

This implies a dramatic transformation of the traditional Jewish religious mindset. The Jewish Torah no longer draws the line between true faith and idolatry. A Gentile Christian is fully the brother or sister in faith of a Messianic Jew. A Jew is still the first chosen, but he or she is no longer the only one. This does not mean, however, that the distinction within the Body between Jew and non-Jews is henceforth merely a matter of rites and discipline. What the rest of Christians must come to understand is that the lasting validity of the first Covenant is an ontological reality that continues to define the uniqueness of the Jewish nation even within the Body of Christ. One is born a Jew – one carries in his or her flesh the ontological mark of God's choice of which circumcision is the visible manifestation. Of course, one can also become a Jew through a process of conversion. But in this case, one becomes fully part of a heritage which is transmitted on a biogenetical basis. By contrast, a Gentile is incorporated into the people of God as a result of his or her private will (or the private will of his/her parents, acting on their behalf). This is the principle of the distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It must subsist in a Body composed of Jews and



non-Jews, otherwise speaking of a Jewish dimension of the Body would be illusory.

This has nothing to do with a practicing form of racism. One should keep in mind that the denial of the biological substrate of Jewishness is, in itself, the worst kind of anti-Semitism, since it implies the denial of Jews' right to exist as a nation. If Nazism was fundamentally racist, it was not because it claimed that Jewishness had a biological substrate, but because it demonized it. Nazism viewed this substrate as a reason to separate Jews from Gentiles and to annihilate them. The problem is not the substrate, but the judgment of value which one associates with it. There are no more objective reasons to demonize a Jew because he is a Jew than to place him higher than a non-Jew for the same reason. Giving room to the distinction between Jews and Gentiles within the Body of Christ serves the exactly opposite purpose, that of fostering communion between Jews and non-Jews. What is at stake here is the healing of the Body of Christ's first and deepest wound; that is, the violent and tragic separation between the disciples of Christ and the major part of Israel.

Blessing the Creator for having created Israel and having guided it by His providence constitutes the core of Israel's prayer. Israel being the instrument, according to its very flesh, of G-d's universal salvation, it is the whole Body of Christ, the community of all those who are redeemed through faith in Yeshua, who is destined to bless the Creator through the lips of the Jewish disciples of Yeshua. Israel lives, moves and breathes within the Body of the Messiah, sanctifying the Name in its very heart, so as to serve as a witness to the ongoing fecundity of the First Covenant within the Second. As much as Jews need to discover their true Messiah in order for Judaism to reach its fulfillment, the Body

of the Messiah needs to reconnect with its Jewish roots in order to correspond to its calling, as being authentically *Christoforos*, bearer-of-Christ.

There is hardly any doubt that allotting space to the Jewish Torah will be seen in historical Churches as a frightening novelty that, if adopted, would break away from a long tradition of anti-Judaic legislation. But faithfulness to the Gospel and the teaching of the apostles is a higher criterion than faithfulness to human traditions. To support and illustrate this view, I would like, as my last point, to elaborate on a concrete example, that of *Kashrut*.

#### **4. Kashrut and the unity of the Body**

*Kashrut* is one of the most characteristic features of the Jewish Torah. How many times have I heard my Catholic brothers and sisters praise God, in all sincerity of heart, for having liberated people like me from this exacting and utterly complicated dietary discipline? The key-passage of Scriptures which lies behind such a patronizing attitude is the vision of Peter in Acts 10. In total contrast with the Law proclaimed in a number of passages of the Torah, for instance in Lev.11, Peter is ordered by God to eat the unclean food that comes down from Heaven. To the horrified Peter, the heavenly voice declares:

“What God has purified, ἐκαθάρισεν, do not declare it unclean” (Acts,10.15).

I cannot see any other event to which the mention of a purification could allude besides the *katharismos* of the human kind and the whole cosmos that Christ performed by offering himself on the cross. As the author of the epistle to the Hebrews writes:

“How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify (καθαριεῖ) our conscience from dead works to serve the living God”. (9:14 ESV).

The vision of Peter is, indeed, decisive. It appears as a divine ratification of Christ’s unheard of teaching on Torah.: "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." (Mat 15:11 NKJ).

If sin speaking in the heart of human beings is what defiles, and not certain categories of aliments, then it is the opposite of sin that purifies, and this can be no other than the Holy Spirit, justifying believers through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. But if the Holy Spirit is what purifies, thus fulfilling the Law of Moses, then Torah-observance is no longer the prerogative of Jews. The fact is that Gentiles too receive a share in the Holy Spirit through faith in Yeshua. No wonder the passage that immediately follows the vision of Peter recounts his decision to incorporate Gentiles – Gentile as Gentiles, without requiring that they become members of the Jewish people - into the Body of Christ:

“ <sup>34</sup> Then Peter opened *his* mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality.

<sup>35</sup> "But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.(...)

(...)

<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word.

<sup>45</sup> And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.

<sup>46</sup> For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered,

<sup>47</sup> "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we *have*?"

<sup>48</sup> And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. (Acts 10:44-48 NKJ)

At this point, should we infer from this episode that the Jewish approach to Torah is henceforth obsolete, being superseded by a most perfect observance rooted into the gift of the Holy Spirit?

It is one thing is to claim that what was unclean is now clean; it is quite another to claim that what used to be clean is now unclean. In actual fact, Peter and the apostles do not seem to draw the conclusion that the rules of *Kashrut* no longer hold within the Body of Christ. There are, indeed, those for whom they will not hold, and those are the Gentiles. From the fact that G-d has "made no distinction between us and them, purifying their heart by faith" according to the words of Peter in Acts 15, the decision which is taken by the group of the apostles, on the suggestions of Peter and James, is merely to allow Gentiles not to observe purity laws, implying that there is no question that the Jewish disciples will continue to observe them. For sure, the Torah of Moses has constituted a burden for the Jews themselves, as it is said in the same passage (v.10), but the implication is that it should no longer be the case under the regime of Christ's grace.

Is this teaching more, though, than a concession to a community destined to disappear sooner or later, a community that already had so much to struggle with in order to adjust to a complete change of religious regime? The so-called

incident of Antioch, in Gal.2, could easily lead one into that line of thinking. Peter is publicly rebuked by Paul on the grounds that he shuns meals with Gentiles in order to keep kosher (Gal.2). However, if Paul is consistent with himself, which is hardly a dubious matter, what motivates his rebuke is not the fact that Peter, as a Jew, should keep kosher, but that this behavior cannot be perceived by Gentiles as something other than a major offense. As Paul writes in the first epistle to the Corinthians:

(...) if I partake with thanks “(if I am sharing according to grace”/Εἰ ἐγὼ χάριτι μετέχω) why am I evil spoken of for the food over which I give thanks (ὕπὲρ οὗ ἐγὼ εὐχαριστῶ)?

31 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

32 Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God,

33 just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. (1Co 10:30-33 NKJ)

By withdrawing from the company of Gentiles to eat *kosher*, Peter gives the impression that he still considers Gentility as impure, as existing beyond the limits of Torah. In other words, there is nothing wrong with eating kosher or keeping a Jewish Torah, according to Paul. What is wrong is to continue giving to Torah observance the meaning that it had before the sacrifice of Christ; namely, as a boundary separating Jews from the nations, as an impassable fence keeping the pure aloof from the impure. The limit subsists, but it is precisely no longer impassable; it must be gone through each time communion demands it. Does that imply, however, that, without there being something wrong with keeping

kosher, this practice is henceforth reduced to some sort of ethnic habit deprived of religious value? Indeed saying what *kosher* practice should no longer mean does not yet tell what it should now mean or even prove that it may still be meaningful. However, the question that I see is whether the most genuine meaning of *kosher* practice should change. Is kosher practice not, fundamentally, the way in which Israel honors the name of G-d in conformity with what G-d has prescribed to Israel? Claiming that Jews should abandon *kosher* practice after the advent of the Messiah is equivalent to claiming that the Covenant between G-d and Israel is abolished as a consequence of the new Covenant sealed in the blood of Christ. But the faithfulness of God to Israel would remain forever, even if Jews were to become unfaithful to God. The first alliance is alive in the second.

The food that Paul shared with Gentiles was as pure as the food he was sharing with Jews, because in both cases, he was giving thanks to G-d and doing it in the name of Yeshua:

“(...) if I partake with thanks “(if I am sharing according to grace”), why am I evil spoken of for the food over which I give thanks)?”

However, the two meals, the Gentile and the Jewish one, differed because the same grace had a distinct meaning for each community. While the first meal celebrated the integration of Gentiles into the body of Christ, the second celebrated the welcoming of the Messiah of Israel by his own people. There is no reason why the second meaning should be abolished. It is precisely its rediscovery which prompted the growth of the Messianic movement.

Accordingly, what comes to light, on the occasion of this discussion over kashrut, is a whole ecclesiology, the characteristics of which are quite different from the present structures of the Church – of any existing Church or

congregation. In this framework, there are communities composed of Jewish believers, others composed of Gentiles believers, each with its own distinct approach to Torah observance. This distinction does not suggest any sort of discrimination. No Jew can be forced to become a member of a Jewish community if he/she does not want to and Gentiles may join Jewish communities if they nourish the prospect of being someday received as full-fledged members of the Jewish nation. All communities recognize the Revelation of Christ -not only his teaching, but also his life and death- as the ultimate hermeneutical key to the interpretation of the Torah, so that they all partake of one sacramental mystery. Moreover, there are individuals, like Peter, who have a special duty of preserving the communion among the specific communities. Such are the apostles and their followers: they are appointed to the care of the universal Church; that is, of the community formed of all the different communities. Their task is not to let the principle of distinction that establishes respectively Jewish and Gentile communities degenerate into a factor of mutual discrimination. Hindering the legitimate autonomy of communities in the name of unity is dictatorship; sacrificing the principle of communion in the name of local autonomy is anarchy. In order to promote the organic harmony of the whole Body, the apostolic ministry is to strike the right balance between legitimate idiosyncrasy and universal communion.

As this example of *Kashrut* shows, advocating the right of a Jewish Torah to have a place in the Body of Yeshua is neither a heresy nor a whimsical, folkloric gesture without bearing on the life of the Church. There cannot be two Torahs. Messianic Jews and Christian Gentiles alike confess that Jesus is the

fulfillment of the Torah of Moses; the grace of the Holy Spirit is the living Law that animates the Body that they form together. However, Jewish and Gentiles cannot, or rather should not, draw on the unique Torah of Moses in the same manner as they are themselves striving to fulfill it in the wake of their one, true Master. There is a sense in which the Torah is Jewish, as the unique lot destined by God to his first-born, and it is precisely because of this that Messianic Jews will always prefer to speak in terms of Torah than in terms of morals or spiritual metaphors. It is essential to the whole Body that space be granted to this living and concrete Torah. Torah is the way. True, such a step cannot but have dramatic consequences on the life and structure of the Church that Christ founded. Some – I have in mind disciples from historical Churches- will have to compromise with a perennial hierarchic concept of unity. Others – I have mostly in mind Messianic congregations – will need to moderate their pledge of autonomy. All of them will perceive the establishment of communities of Jewish observance as a painful division within the Body of the Messiah. However, this process, as we have tried to show throughout this presentation, is precisely about the opposite: not division, but reintegration. This is, assuredly, a great miracle, *Nes gadol*, of which we can all, in one way or another, become participants. As Paul writes “Since their rejection meant the reconciliation of the world, do you know what their re-acceptance will mean? Nothing less than life from the dead! ” (Rom 11:15 NJB).