

Tying and untying shoes: a Church-Jew Messianic approach to Torah fulfillment

Have you ever tried to catch yourself in a trap? It sounds very difficult in principle. If one knows where the trap lies, how could one ever fall into it? Actually, the issue disappears if this trap is so conspicuous that the challenge consists rather of not falling into it. This is the privilege of acrobats. The juggler sets a deliberate trap before himself when he throws his bottles in the air, as the probability of dropping them is so high. Well, that is about the way a “Church Jew” like me feels when he is asked to discuss the topic of our conference. For him, it is a trap of cosmic proportions and he feels as fit to avoid it as an amateur juggler on the first day of his training. Let me briefly explain why.

Searching the ways that would make a Jewish expression in the Body of Christ possible has led me, just like the other members of the Consultation, to emphasize the significance of the Jewish notion of Torah - hence the theme of this year’s meeting: “fulfilling the Torah in Christ”. The idea is that one cannot separate faithfulness to the Torah given to Moses from the way it has been understood throughout almost two millennia of Jewish interpretation centered on the notion of religious observances or *mitsvot* practice. One studies Torah in order to be faithful to it, and *mitsvot* like circumcision, Shabbat observance, kashrut, festivals, prayers etc. are the embodiment of this Torah faithfulness. Meanwhile for a Church

Jew like me, trying to live more or less in accordance with the standards set by my own Church is already so demanding that, even if the most basic features of traditional Jewish life should raise no major doctrinal difficulty, following them would be next to impossible on a practical level. Just think about celebrating simultaneously the festivals of the Jewish and the Church calendars. Besides the fact that the liturgical year would very much look like an endless religious festival, something I have nothing against in principle -although it probably would become slightly tiresome in the long run - compatibility is far from guaranteed: how is one supposed to immerse oneself in the joy of Purim in the midst of Lenten penance? Church life is the way the Church understands the concrete observance of Christ's law, and it is dramatically different, at least at first sight, from the way traditional Judaism has defined Torah observance. There precisely lies the trap. One option is to maintain that fulfilling the Torah in Yeshua includes following traditional Jewish *mitsvot*, but this implies that I should leave the Church I belong to in order to follow them. The other option is to give up the idea that the Church - my Church - is able to grant space to a concept of Torah that genuinely embraces the Jewish tradition. Whichever way the Catholic Jew that I am should choose, it seems that the very purpose of the Helsinki Consultation is doomed. If my Church is integrally part of the Body of Christ, moreover if, according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the Body of Christ subsists in my Church, the Body of Christ simply cannot shelter a genuinely Jewish expression of her faith. My Church might well teach how to accomplish the Law of Christ, but then this Law must be something totally different from the Torah in the Jewish sense of the term.

Of course, one is free to envisage compromises, such as alleviating the system of Torah observances in order to make it compatible with the minimal requirements of Church life. Conversely, or simultaneously, one could conceive of softening the requirements of Church life so as to make them Jewish Torah-

compatible. The result is predictable enough. I would become a stranger in my own Church without ever dreaming of being seen as kosher by traditional Jewish believers. Besides, however successful this Judeo-Christian kitchen might be, could it ever be the answer to the issue this meeting is raising; namely, could this compromise formula ever be called the fulfillment of Torah in Christ – the materialization of what Yeshua had in mind when he promised that none of the smallest letters - the iods- of the Law would be left unobserved?

As amateur a juggler or tightrope walker that I am, I will not shy away from the challenge. I would like to take up this issue at a fundamental level, ab ovo as it were. If I do so, it is not because I am fleeing existential or concrete issues. On the contrary, it is because I am convinced that keeping the discussion rolling on practical aspects and would-be arrangements is tantamount to fleeing the core-issue. Indeed, is there or is there not a fulfillment of the Torah in Christ that could simultaneously correspond to the Law of Christ, as embodied in the life of my Church, and to the Jewish understanding of Torah faithfulness? If there is, what is it and what should it look like?

Allow me to start from the beginning with asking what fulfilling Torah means. This will give me the opportunity to point out where, from a Messianic Jewish point of view, the imperfection of the traditional Christian concept of Law lies. I will hence proceed to show the same thing in regard to the traditionally Jewish notion of Torah-observance. These considerations will eventually lead me to formulate a Messianic approach to Torah fulfillment which, in my estimation, opens up a path to the Church Jews of my kin.

1-Preliminary considerations: holiness and Torah fulfillment

According to the Code of Jewish law called *Shulchan Aruch*, tying one's shoes in a certain order is a *mitsva*, and this *mitsva* changes regarding on whether it is a weekday or a Shabbat. On a week day, one is supposed to put the right shoe before the left but to tie the left shoelace before the right. It is just the opposite when one takes one shoes off: untie the right then the left, take off the left then the right.

Let me first acknowledge my debt of gratitude to sr. Myriam-Leah for letting know the very bad Jew that I am about this *mitsva*. It is a very interesting *mitsva* indeed. The order according to which a Jew is supposed to tie his shoes is purposely reminiscent of the order according to which a Jew is supposed to put on *tefillin* or phylacteries. Through *tefillin*, the *mitsva* regarding the tying and untying of shoes has its source in the Torah of Israel. For instance, we read in Ex.13.16:

"This will serve as a sign on your hand would serve, or a headband on your forehead, for by the strength of his hand Yahweh brought us out of Egypt.'

(Exo 13:16 NJB)

Of course, the symbolism of tying shoes is very different from that of tying *tefillin*. The meaning of the latter is to consecrate the whole of our Jewish being - head, heart, hand- to G-d; becoming one for the One. By contrast to the sacredness and nobility of *tefillin*, there is hardly an operation more casual and humble than tying one's shoes. But this humility itself brings to the fore the symbolic dimension associated with tying and untying. There is always a stronger side – the right side for the right-handed person, the left for the lefty- and therefore always a weaker side. By giving precedence to the weaker side when one takes off one's left shoe or at least giving some importance to the weaker foot by tying it after putting on the right shoe, one is reminded of the fact that if discipline is important, kindness should dominate. As always in Judaism, one cannot separate

the ethical and meaningful dimension of religion from the ritualization of a concrete gesture which establishes the connection to Torah and transforms it into a *mitsva*. Because *mitsva* is an act of worship, a tribute to HaShem's holiness, it conveys something of HaShem's holiness into the one who performs it. Still, there is a difference between understanding what a meaningful action is and performing it. There is a distinction between manifesting one's wish to be one as God is one, as it happens when one lays *tefillin*, and being actually one in the likeness of HaShem. There is a difference between tying one's shoes in the correct order and effectively giving priority to kindness over discipline.

I would like to illustrate with one of the numerous stories ascribed to the Besht, the Baal Shem Tov, the semi-mythical founder of the Hassidic movement at the beginning of 18th-century Poland. It is actually a story about someone who was a great story-teller – so great, that everybody went out of his way to hear him. One day a servant of a rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Sharigrod known for his asceticism and severity was so mesmerized by the stories told by the Besht that he forgot to open the door of the synagogue for morning prayer on time. His stern master was on the point of whipping him when the Besht appeared at the door and asked him the favor to tell him a story. The rabbi would have liked to kick out the Besht, but something in the sight of the Besht prevented him from doing so, and he was forced to hear the following very short story." I had three horses of different colors, said the Besht, and they would never neigh when I drove my chariot. One day, a peasant hailed me and advised me to slacken the reins. At that moment, all the three horses started to neigh". The Besht told the rabbi the same story twice, and each time he concluded with a question: "Do you understand?". The rabbi understood that the reason why his servants never complained was not because they were satisfied with their master, but because his discipline was so strict that

they were forced to keep their anguish inside. The rabbi burst into tears and eventually joined the Hassidic movement.

As Hassidic wisdom goes, what matters is not that this story is true but that it could be true. It tells about the difference between knowing that one has to slacken the reins of discipline and actually slackening them in order to give precedence to kindness. The rabbi of Sharigrod would certainly tie his shoes in the correct order. This however did not prevent him from behaving as a tyrant in his own household. *A contrario*, the story teaches us what it means to be really Torah-faithful. One becomes so when the meaning of the *mitsvot* one performs becomes a reality, and when this happens, it is tantamount to breathing a fragrance of God's own holiness or being transformed into it. The purpose of Torah-observance is partaking of HaShem's holiness. To cut it short, holiness is the fulfillment of Torah.

From this point of view, there is a real convergence between the Jewish and the Christian traditions. That discipline must give way to kindness is basic monastic wisdom. This teaching goes back to the origin of monasticism. From one generation to the next, monks and simple Christians have heard it. But those who have implemented this teaching are few, and they are called saints. Saint Serafim of Sarov, who was born three years before the Besht died, was one of them. He had an extraordinary reputation for kindness and compassion for the weak, especially children. Every now and then one cannot help noticing striking similarities between Hassidic holy men and Christian saints. For example, it is said of the Besht that wolves and bears stood on their two feet to give honor to God whenever they heard the Besht sing the *Lekha-dodi*, the hymn for Shabbat. In a similar fashion it is said that whenever bears heard the voice of Serafim they would stop terrorizing people. Instead, they would go deep into the forest and return holding honeycombs in their mouths for Serafim. This refulgence from the original

peace that dwelled in Gan-Eden is the sign of actual holiness, the evidence that whatever Divine Law is, it is fulfilled in this person.

As I underscore the convergence between what Jewish and Christians traditions have in mind when they point at the fulfillment of Divine Law, my purpose is certainly not to minimize the fundamental differences between the respective logics of these two traditions. The dynamics that goes from Torah study to the practice of *mitsvot* and back from *mitsvot* to Torah study is not the dynamics that goes from sacramental life to Christian charity and back from the practice of charity to sacramental life. Each type of dynamics refers to a religious world of its own, both in terms of mystical experience and theological thinking. But this difference is precisely what begs the question; namely: how is it that religious worlds which seem so far apart appear to have converging understandings of what it means to fulfill the Law? Actually, taking this paradox seriously entails different types of questions from the point of view of each tradition.

For a Jew, accepting the possibility of true holiness in the Christian world challenges the idea that Jews are the only depositaries of true light amidst a world more or less plunged in heathen darkness. By the same token, it questions the belief that the complicated discipline of *mitsvot* is the only way to attaining holiness in this world. Conversely, for a Christian, accepting that true holiness is possible in the Jewish world challenges the idea that Christ and by way of consequence the sacramental economy of his Church, are the conditions *sine qua non* for reaching a state of more or less lasting and effective union with God.

As I contemplate this problematic situation, I wonder if it is not due to a certain narrowness that mars the concept of Divine Law in both traditions, a narrowness that contrasts with the stupefying freedom of those who genuinely love God, those in whom we recognize holy men. In other words, the problem might have less to do with the concrete fulfillment of Divine Law than about the

way each tradition understands or conceptualizes Divine Law for itself. Let me then try to explore this path, as I discuss the concept of Law in traditional Christianity and then in traditional Judaism.

2. Divine Law in traditional Christianity: where the rub lies

In Christ, the duties fixed by the Torah, the Law of Israel, ceased to apply to Israel exclusively. Through faith in Christ, men of all languages, tribes and nations have become partakers of the Divine Law. At least a countless number among them have believed so. Whatever we think about this fact, it is a fact and it is also probably the major event in the history of mankind. As we read in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the epistles of the New Testament, this shift did not occur smoothly to say the least. The apostolic community has had to engage in a thorough and often painful rethinking of the Law of Israel in order to make place for the former heathens. On the one hand, they knew that a number of dispositions associated with the Torah of Moses could not apply to Gentiles, because they made sense only in the framework of a nation defined according to ethnic criteria. On the other hand, it befell the apostolic group to become the first witnesses to the collapse of a number of dispositions associated with the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem. The decision they made in these circumstances, a decision that they ascribed to the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, had consequences that cannot be overestimated. Faithful Gentiles would cease to be integrated into the nation of Israel as had been the case until then for those who used to be called God-fearers, people such as Rahab or Ruth. Christ-believing Gentiles would receive the Law of Israel as Gentiles and not as Jews. The genealogical difference between Jews and Gentiles persisted, together with its implications in terms of duties and customs, but without difference of qualitative status. This decision settled the creation of an entity distinct from the nation of Israel; namely, the creation of the Church. There

is little doubt that, by transmitting the Law to non-Jews on behalf of a common faith in Christ, many in the apostolic community were thinking of a gracious adjustment along the lines of James's speech in Act. 15:

"It is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:19-20).

There is also little doubt that for this community, the possibility of such adjustment was anchored in the absolute authority associated with the teaching, life, death and resurrection of Yeshua, as confirmed by the works of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, as we read in the writings of the New Testament, and especially in the epistles of Paul, it is in the light of the Pascal mystery, as unfolding the mysteries hidden from the beginning as well as foretelling those kept for the end of times, that the sphere of relevance of the Torah of Moses came to be re-assessed and re-defined. The word of God was no longer exclusively destined to Jews; it pointed to a truth that lay both below and beyond the wall of hatred separating Jews and Gentiles, in the direction of Adam their common ancestor. Indeed, the widening of the Law to Gentiles, so as to encompass them in this entity called Church, cannot be dissociated from the universalistic interpretation of Torah, a process that leads to isolate a content considered as essential from the gangue of historical contingencies. In some way, this process had already been initiated by the *LXX* and Philo of Alexandria. However, the idea that a synthesis between the message of Israel, as conveyed by the Law of Moses, and the teaching of Greek philosophers on human nature and ethics could only be achieved in the light of Christ rapidly became integral to the self-awareness of the Church. In actual fact, Christian theology developed along such lines for more than one millenium, roughly speaking from Justin of Alexandria to pre-Reformation scholasticism.

As extraordinary, fundamental and fascinating as this process of hermeneutical universalization appears to be, one can still wonder if it manages to fulfill the Torah, in the sense of exhausting its truth. Indeed, why should the emergence of an ethical teaching valid for all human beings obliterate the specific duties that are assigned to Jews as Jews by the Torah itself? Did we not just say that the Church had been primarily established on the principle of a communion between Jews and Gentiles, each part with its specific rights and duties? A Torah which is complete is a Torah which does not abolish the relevance of the first Covenant in order to establish the preeminence of the second. However, this is what happens in any sermon delivered in a traditional Church. A Christian preacher will simultaneously historicize and de-historicize the Torah of Israel: "This was the Law given to Israel before Christ, but now, as disciples of Christ, we must interpret what is said here in a spiritual sense". But why indeed? Is it because faith in Christ has deprived Torah commandments of any relevance? Or is it not rather because the "we" who speak here have the consciousness of not being part of the people to whom the Torah of Moses is destined on a literal level? In that case, the systematic spiritualization of Torah would be devoid of theological justification. It would stem from the false assumption that the Church must be exclusively composed of Gentiles; that is, of a people who cannot in any way identify with the people of Israel. But what of Jewish followers of Christ? Are these members of the Church not entitled to cultivate a special relationship to the Torah of Moses, as being part of the people about whom the Torah itself declares that it was given to them? Of course, the question is what kind of relationship.

At this point, one should call to mind the most obvious reason why a literal reception of the Torah of Moses is no longer possible, even in the case of traditional Judaism. The fact is that most institutions involved in applying the Torah of Moses are no longer extant. The complex system of sacrifices described by

this Torah disappeared on the day the second Temple was destroyed at the hands of the Romans. One could say that half of Torah subsisted after this destruction. The people who were its primary addressee were still there, but not the tools necessary to fulfill the Torah in a literal sense. In order to survive as a nation; namely as the people to whom Torah had been given, Jews or rather their religious authorities started interpreting the commandments contained in it as *mitsvot*. They kept on working out a code of behavior that, by echoing these commandments in situations where they could no longer be performed literally, would nonetheless, by shaping all aspects of Jewish existence, witness the faithfulness of Israel to the One. The crucial issue to Jewish disciples of Christ is how far this type of Torah faithfulness is from the fulfillment of Torah in Christ, how much does it provide for the part of the concept of Torah that we found missing in traditional Christianity.

Historically we know that the Jewish mode of Torah faithfulness has been rejected by pre-Reformation as well as post-Reformation Church traditions. The reasoning behind was quite elementary: this Jewish mode of Torah-faithfulness could not be the fulfillment of Torah in Christ since it rejected Christ.

One should be wary of too much self-evidence however. Trivial experience tells us that there is often a distance between what we claim to be and what we are. Let us formulate the issue from a Christian point of view. We could put it this way: is the fact that traditional Judaism refuses to acknowledge the historical character called Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel a sufficient reason to deny the presence of Jesus Christ, the one that the Church acknowledges as the true Messiah of Israel, within the tradition that Jews developed on the basis of the Torah of Moses? In actual fact, according to the theological tradition of the Church – I have especially in mind the reflection of Thomas Aquinas – the Law of Moses derives from the Word as the eternal Law of God. It is a partial refulgence from this eternal Law which comes to be fully revealed in Jesus Christ, the incarnate

Word. From this perspective, the one who delves in the wisdom of Torah cannot but come closer to the wisdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. But I believe there is more to say about this issue.

As I am about to present my own theological view, I should warn the audience that this is not part of the official doctrine of the Catholic Church, although I believe it is fully consistent with it. Earlier on I gave examples of Jewish holiness. If we believe that one can reach holiness through the practice of *mitsvot*, this implies that this practice conveys effectively the grace of God. One does not reach holiness by one's own efforts; even if the commitment of one's will is a condition to holiness or union with God, what the Hassidic tradition called *devekhut*, this commitment can hardly achieve anything without the force that comes from above, that which Church tradition calls grace. As I explained above, traditional Judaism is built on the idea that *mitsvot*, the sacrifices performed by our bodies and minds in remembrance of Torah, are able to make up for the henceforth impracticable sacrifices of the Temple. But the whole idea of sacrifice has to do with the fact that the faith and good will of individual human beings are not sufficient to placate God's legitimate anger or to attract His benevolence. The notion of sacrifice implies a mediating element between the one who offers the sacrifice and the One who receives it; namely, the victim somehow standing for the one who offers the sacrifice. In the absence of Temple sacrifices, I would like to confront traditional Judaism with the question that Isaac once addressed to his father Abraham: "'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Gen 22:7 NAS)?" In the present case I would reply to Isaac's question with an answer that differs slightly from the one he received from his father. As we know, Abraham replied "God will provide the lamb". Three millennia later, I would say "God has provided". Could or rather should a Catholic theologian not uphold the view that Yeshua, Meshiah of Israel, is henceforth the mediator

between God and the prayers of the people He chose first, this out of respect for the coherence of his own Church tradition and notwithstanding the official position of Judaism itself? This would at least warrant the theological insights of many Christians who have approached the living faith and tradition of Israel. I have in mind St. Edith Stein in the first place, but she is one among many others.

Provided this view is not without relevance, it enables us to challenge the almost universally accepted Christian cliché according to which the only place where the Law can be fulfilled in Christ is within the Church, whichever be this Church. One becomes able to justify from a Christian point of view the claim that the Besht and Serafim of Sarov, each following the path of his own tradition, have both fully fulfilled the Law. Can this help to solve the question that gave rise to these considerations; namely, how a Church Jew like me should relate, in practical terms, to the commandment of fulfilling Torah in Christ?

I would contend that until now we have only provided half of the answer we are looking for. We understand that the practice of *mitsvot* is not incompatible with the fulfillment of Torah in Christ, so that a Church Jew like me should be open to the possibility of integrating this practice into his religious existence. As we said earlier, the Church will not fully receive the Torah of Moses as long as it is satisfied with a universalization, a metaphorization of it that lacks the particularity and concreteness of Israel's flesh – that, namely, which materializes with the existence within it of Jews practicing *mitsvot*. However, the question remains to what extent the fact that a Church Jew is not a traditional Jew, in the sense that he or she openly acknowledges the Messianhood of Yeshua, should modify the content of a practice defined by Jews who do not acknowledge it. Should fulfilling the Torah mean something different for Church Jews than for traditional Jews?

This is the second half of the question. Until now, I have dealt with the narrowness of the concept of Torah in traditional Christianity. I would like now to expand upon the narrowness of the same concept in traditional Judaism. I believe this can shed light on the type of Yeshua-discipleship that God is expecting from Church Jews.

3. Torah-observance according to traditional Judaism: where the rub lies

There is something thoroughly odd in the idea that Jews who explicitly believe in Christ should conform to a life of worship where Christ is explicitly ignored or where his implicit presence is denied by the very Jews who have elaborated it and continue to abide by it. Precisely, if it is true, the fact that the core of one's tradition remains invisible to the one who practices it must create a longing for the revelation which is still missing, at least on an unconscious level. Israel's ongoing yearning after the coming of the Messiah is as such an obvious and conscious sign of this absence of accomplishment. Should therefore those who believe that this hidden core has already been revealed take as their model those who are supposed to more or less consciously suffer from this lack of accomplishment? My personal belief in the invisible role of Yeshua as mediator of the prayers of Israel does not lead me into believing that the current shape of Israel's religious life is as such or yet the fulfillment of Torah in Christ.

In actual fact a *mitsva*, according to the mind-set of traditional Judaism, is not only a unilateral act of glorification of God; it also draws the boundary between the pure and the impure, between Jews who are faithful to the Covenant and the rest of mankind. Goyim and bad Jews constitute the rest of mankind, the only difference between them being that a bad Jew has always the possibility of

crossing the border, of making his return or *t'shuva*, whereas a Goy has to convert, which is a much more complicated process. Circumcision traces the first boundary between those who partake of purity and light by contrast to all those who do not. But in the life of faithful Jews, especially among ultra-orthodox Jews, keeping up this boundary is a task of every second and involves the minutest element of daily life. The complicated rules of *kashrut* offer the most obvious contrast between those who stand inside and those who are outside. One remembers the example of the order according to which one is supposed to put on and take off one's shoes. Of course this notion of boundary is somewhat relative. A good Jew will always find a better Jew around to suggest that he is not inside the boundary or that he risks to slip outside because he does not do enough to keep up the fence round the Torah through a truly rigorous practice of *mitsvot*. One can always make a higher bid in terms of *mitsvot*. However, even for the most liberal of the faithful Jews, the idea behind *mitsva* practice remains that of tracing a boundary reminiscent of the cosmic *havdalot*/divisions of the first chapter of the book of Genesis - separating those who are inside from those who are outside, the pure from the impure, the sacred from the profane as God once separated light from darkness and the waters of above from the waters beneath.

I would contend that founding Torah-observance on such notion of *mitsva* is compatible with the belief that Yeshua has revealed us the path towards Torah fulfillment. I know that new trends in modern exegesis like to depict the disciples of Yeshua, Paul especially, as Torah-observant Jews. As much as I am convinced that the first generations of Jewish followers of Yeshua had a vivid awareness of their Jewish identity and the distinct duties that derived from it, I cannot buy the idea that they were observant in the sense of their non-Messianic fellow believers. No disciple is greater than his Master. I do not believe that Yeshua was observant in the sense of the observant Jews of his time - those who go under

the names of Pharisees and Sadducees in the Gospels. Moreover, I am of the opinion that the core of his message had to do with breaking with such Jews' understanding of religious observance. This was of course in no way akin to a rupture with Torah. It simply meant a radically different understanding of Torah-faithfulness. How could we formulate the essence of this new interpretation? Let us ask ourselves what was the breaking-point with those who were regarded as Torah-observant.

When Christ is asked which is the greatest of all commandments, he answers with quotes from the Deuteronomy and Leviticus: to love God with all one's heart (Deut.6:5 eg.), a commandment he associates with the love of one's neighbor (Lev. 19:8 eg) , as if our love of God could not be totally true without our love for our neighbor being totally true. "On these two commandments the whole law hangs, and the prophets" (Mt 22:40). In another passage (Luke10) where Christ is asked who we should consider as our neighbor, Yeshua answers with the parable of the good Samaritan. In this case, the one who fulfills the Torah perfectly or abides by the greatest commandment of Torah, is not someone who is *inside*, at least if one takes *mitsvot* as the defining criterion. It is the Samaritan, the outsider, who, unlike the Kohen or the Levite, fulfills the Torah. In general, it is true to say that all the conflicts that arise between Yeshua and the religious authorities of his time regarding the interpretation of Torah touch on this very point; that is, justifying a lack of actual love towards the Torah-outsiders in the name of Torah faithfulness. Yeshua's neighbors or Torah-outsiders are sinners of every kind, the sick and the possessed, foreigners, whomsoever insiders believe themselves entitled to look upon down. Meanwhile what comes to the fore is the way in which insiders turn the Torah boundary between the pure or impure into their own advantage, so that under the guise of the greatest commandment, that of the love

of God, goes the exact opposite: greed, vain-glory and narcissism - in a word, love for oneself:

"What man shall there be among you, who shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it, and lift it out? (Mat 12:11)

Outsiders are insiders and insiders are outsiders. It is the very boundary between the pure and the impure that Yeshua's interpretation of Torah-faithfulness reformulates. When Christ says that the whole Torah depends on the love for God and the love for one's neighbor, the verb which is used here, *kremannumi*, means also suspend in the sense of neutralizing. The greatest commandments can suspend the imperative force of minor ones. Conversely, minor *mitsvot* realize Torah-faithfulness *on the condition* that they stem from the love for God and for one's neighbor. In other words, inner purity is not the result of perfect *mitsvot*-observance; rather, perfect *mitsvot*-observance is the result of inner purity:

"That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." (Mar 7:20-23 NAS) .

The very being of Yeshua shows what this purity is, as it is exclusively defined by his love for God and for his neighbor. If it is this purity that makes *mitsvot*-observance perfect, the way in which Jews can partake of the purity cannot be a *mitsva* itself, since its accomplishment would in turn imply a preexisting condition of purity, and so on *ad infinitum*. In the New Testament, what creates in us this condition of purity is called the grace of the Holy Spirit and it

is understood as the gift associated with the recognition of Yeshua as the Word of God and the Messiah of Israel, dead and risen for his people:

“For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (Joh 1:17 NAS).

There is no reason why the grace of Yeshua should suppress the bond between Israel and the Torah of Moses. At the same time, there is no reason why non-Jews should not be able to partake in this purity on behalf of their faith in Yeshua, without having to become part of the nation of Israel. This is the foundational discovery related in the *Acts of Apostles* and theorized in the epistles of Paul. The speech of Peter in the house of Cornelius, in Acts 10, bears solemn witness to this state of things:

34: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him." (...)"

Under these circumstances, the performance of a *mitsva* related to the Torah of Moses can no longer have the meaning of separating the pure from the impure. I see here the reason why Paul scolds Peter when he withdraws from eating with Pagans in Antioch. I do not think that Paul sees anything wrong with the *mitsva* of *kashrut* as a commandment destined to Jews. Indeed, that Jews and Gentiles will follow different disciplines when it comes to food is implied by the decision of the first council of Jerusalem, as is clear from Acts 15. What Paul blames in the conduct of Peter is letting his Jewish *mitsva* practice cast doubt on the purity of those who do not practice it. Indeed, those who have had part in the bath of regeneration, that is, baptism, Gentiles as well as Jews, are pure, and the the food they eat has equally been purified through the sacrifice of Yeshua.

My purpose, here, is not to project Yeshua's denunciation of pharisaic hypocrisy onto the rabbinic model of Torah-faithfulness. As I said, I believe that

Christ, Messiah of Israel, dwells in the midst of the relationship between Israel and God as conveyed by the *mitsvot*-tradition of Judaism. Still, I think that the concept of *mitsva* developed by traditional Judaism is not immediately fit to fulfill Torah in Christ as long as it implies the impurity of those who do not observe it.

True, I have said earlier that a figure like the Besht seems to have fulfilled Torah while keeping the tradition of *mitsvot*-observance. But if he seems so strikingly close to Christian saints, is it not precisely because he did not hesitate to shake up the received understanding of *mitsvot*-faithfulness as a self-sufficient separation between the pure and the impure? Does the whole Hassidic insight not point to the fact that the key to perfect torah faithfulness stems rather from the inner sanctuary of the heart than from rigid *mitsvot*-observance? In order to recover the joy of Torah and develop *devekhut* or the state of inner union with God, one often needs to slacken the reins of *mitsvot*-observance. In order to give effective priority to the weak over the strong, one sometimes needs to forget about the order according to which one should tie one's shoes. I see in Yeshua's interpretation of Torah the perfect expression of what Hassidism is looking for. At the same time, however, I cannot forget that the way in which historical Christianity has understood Yeshua's insight has led to obliterate the specific bond between Israel and God sealed in the Torah of Moses.

At this point, what conclusions should we draw from all these considerations? For one thing, the imperfection of the Christian concept of faithfulness to Divine Law and that of its Jewish equivalent appear to be symmetrically opposite. Whereas the universalism of the Christian concept of Law reduces the particularity of Israel to a spiritual metaphor, the particularity of the Jewish notion of *mitsva* observance does not leave room for the universality of Christ's redemption. Accordingly, I am afraid that the trap I have been trying to avoid throughout this presentation is about to shut down on me. On the one hand,

it seems that historical Christianity has no room for for a Jewish approach to Torah fulfillment. On the other hand, it seems that one basic assumption of Jewish *mitsvot*-practice; namely, the separation between Jewish purity and Gentile impurity, is incompatible with the idea of a fulfillment of Torah in Yeshua. How could therefore Christianity ever open up to a notion of *mitsva*-observance that would not betray the Jewish understanding of it?

Sometimes one needs to get really close to a trap to find the one and only way to avoid it. Let me finally explain why I believe it is the case here.

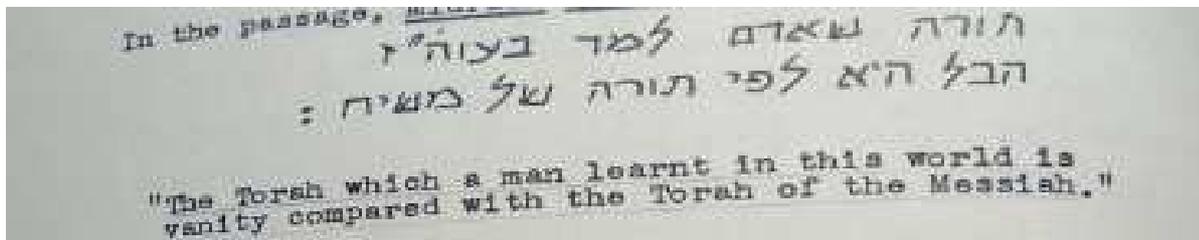
4. The notion of Messianic *mitsva*

What is a *mitsva* that no longer relegates those who do not observe it among those who are unfaithful to the Torah? Provided such *mitsva* observance is thinkable, it is at any rate unthinkable without a complete transformation of traditional *mitsva* observance. But if so, how can we, Church Jews, continue to claim that our path goes through a rediscovery of the significance of the Jewish *mitsvot* bi-millennial tradition? Can we say that one is faithful to a tradition when one needs to transform it completely in order to observe it?

There is one case and, as I believe, only one case when one can advocate such a paradoxical view. It is when the tradition itself envisages its radical transformation as its own fulfillment. However, is this precisely not the case in Judaism with the concept of the Messianic era? Let me investigate this possibility in the last part of this presentation.

In actual fact a number of passages from various rabbinical sources, without delving into the Kabbalistic tradition, envisage a radical change affecting Torah or Torah-practice as a consequence of the coming of the Messiah. It is probably in a midrash on Qohelet ascribed to an Amora of the end of the third century, R. Simon

bar Zabdai, that one finds the most explicit statement regarding such transformation:



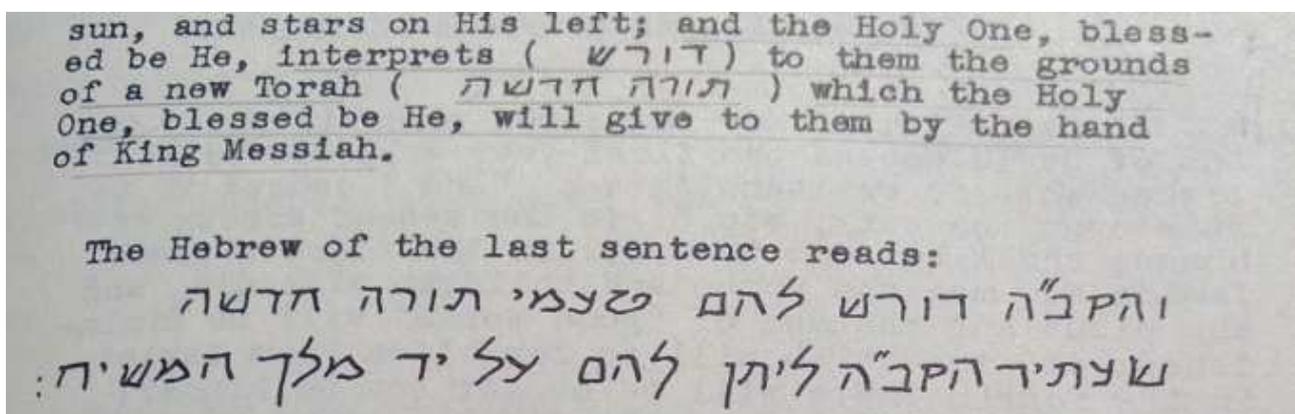
R. Hezekiah, a master from the following generation, comments this saying in reference to this verse from the book of Jeremiah:

“This is the Covenant I shall make with the House of Israel when those days have come, Yahweh declares. Within them I shall plant my Law, writing it on their hearts. Then I shall be their God and they will be my people” (JB Jeremiah 31:33)

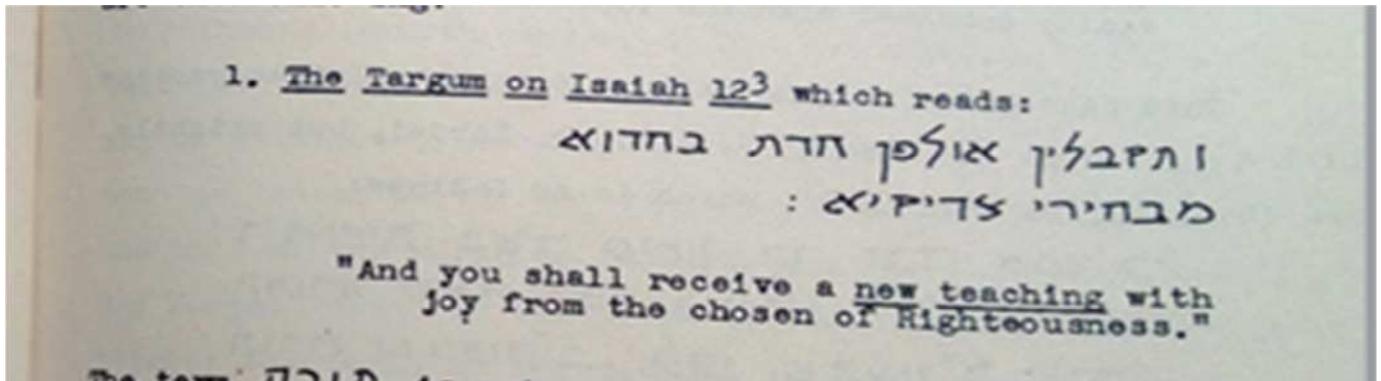
Rav. Hezekiah is quoted as saying: “For in this world a man learns and forgets, but in the time to come, what is written there: ‘ I shall plant my Law, writing it on their hearts’

ועל-לכם בקרבם את-תורתִי תתִּיהֶן אֶכְתִּבֶנּוּ

The *Yalkut on Isaiah*, a medieval compilation of ancient rabbinical comments, describes the age to come, *olam-ha-baa* - which is sometimes, not always, distinguished from the Messianic age- in these terms:



To which a *Targum on Isaiah* (12.3) echoes :



Sometimes, rabbinical texts seem to go so far as to oppose the idea of Torah and *mitsvot* to the Messianic era. The *Tanna debe Eliyahu*, consigned in the Babylonian Talmud¹, teaches:

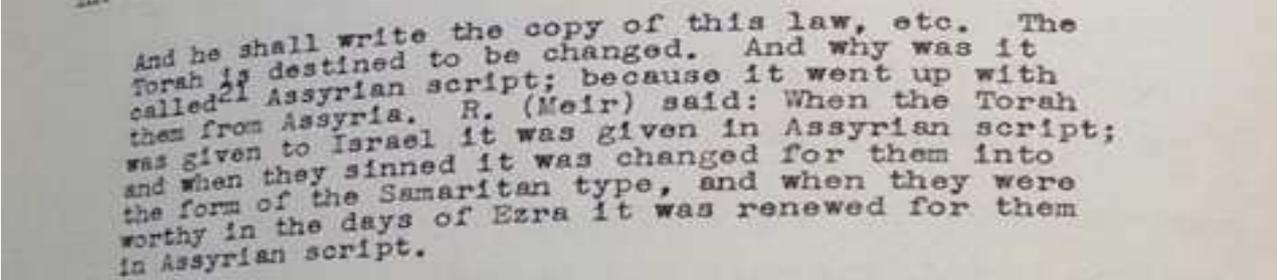
The Tanna debe Eliyyahu taught: The world is to exist six thousand years: the first two thousand years are to be void; the next two thousand years are the period of the Torah; and the following two thousand years are the period of the Messiah.

R. Simeon ben Eleazar, an Amora of the second century, defines the Messianic era as a time when there will be “neither merit nor guilt”, which obviously refers to the practice of *mitsvot*. Nidah 61b states R. Joseph saying that “in the future time, *ba-olam-ha-ba*, *mitsvot* will be abolished”. Some Jewish scholars like Baeck and Klausner have contended that this applies not only to the condition of the dead, but also to the Messianic era.

¹ Sanhedrin 97b and Abodah Zarah 9b

Regarding this last point, I would embrace the view of most Jewish scholars. To the extent in which one can speak of the Jewish tradition as a whole, it does not envisage the Messianic era as devoid of *mitsvot*, but as providing a teaching on Torah which will be so new, so different, that the very foundations of the way in which *mitsvot* used to be observed before that time will be completely transformed, as if this perennial way was to be simply abandoned. One could understand the saying of r. Joseph as meaning that the passage to the Messianic era will be experienced by Jews as a sort of death- they will from now on live as if they were dead to Torah.

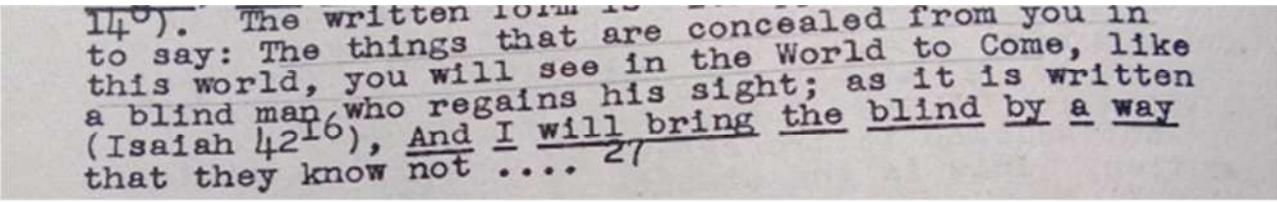
As paradoxical as it might seem, there is no insoluble contradiction between the teaching of the Jewish tradition on this radical transformation of Torah in the Messianic era and the fundamental belief of the very same tradition in the absolute immutability of the Torah transmitted to Moses. On this point also, I would follow the point of view of classical Jewish exegesis. It is not the Torah that is to undergo a radical change, but the understanding that Jews have of it. In actual fact, this understanding is dependent on the historical circumstances that are both affecting the life of the nation and are effected as a consequence of its past moral behavior. This comes out clearly from a passage of the *Tosefta* (Sanhedrin 4:7), an ancient compilation of laws meant to complement the *Mishna* or the first codification of these laws. The question commented upon is the reason for the book of Deuteronomy, a book that repeats or copies the Torah, *Mishne Torah*. The answer given by an ancient rabbi (*Sifre on Deuteronomy*) is that this reason has to do with the fact that the Torah will undergo a change, something which is expressed in Hebrew with a verb akin to *Mishne: lehishtanot*, to change. In the same passage from the *Tosefta*, we read:



And he shall write the copy of this law, etc. The Torah is destined to be changed. And why was it called²¹ Assyrian script; because it went up with them from Assyria. R. (Meir) said: When the Torah was given to Israel it was given in Assyrian script; and when they sinned it was changed for them into the form of the Samaritan type, and when they were worthy in the days of Ezra it was renewed for them in Assyrian script.

The textual copy or the repetition, *Mishne*, according to a specific written code, is what gives to a generation of Jews access to the immutable content of Torah; but it at the same time indicates that this access is historically circumscribed and subject to change in accordance to the existential situation of the following generation. This access to the immutable Torah of God can increase or decrease as a consequence of the behavior of Israel and the decisions of the Most High, which is the reason why this Torah is said to change. The Torah of *Galut*, exile, is identical to the Torah of *Geulah*, redemption, but the intensity of its understanding and therefore the way it is put into practice changes radically from the first era to the second.

What is quintessentially specific to the *Torah khadasha* of Israel's Messiah is that it is not a repetition, *mishne*, of any previous understanding of it. As rabbi Yochanan ben Zachai is quoted teaching in Numbers Rabbah:

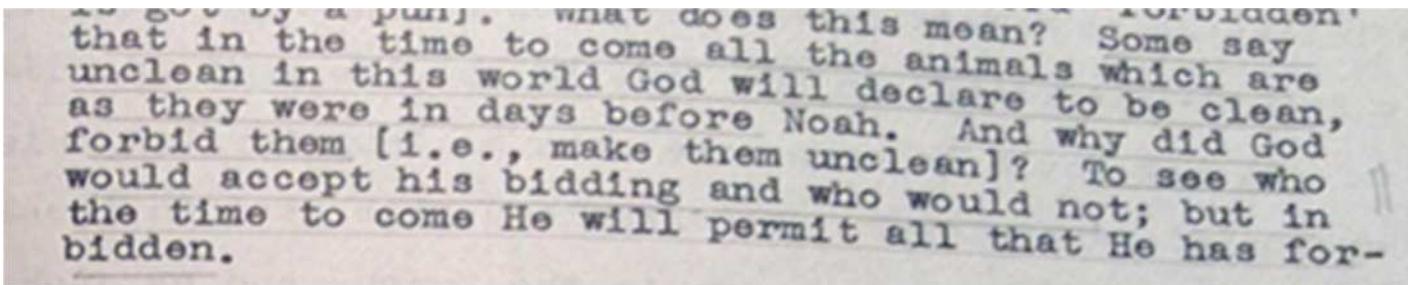


14^o). The written Torah is to say: The things that are concealed from you in this world, you will see in the World to Come, like a blind man who regains his sight; as it is written (Isaiah 42¹⁶), And I will bring the blind by a way that they know not 27

With the coming of the Messiah, the ultimate foundations of the Torah transmitted by Moses will come to light. What is implied here is clear from the same passage. The decrees of God will cease to be practiced because they are stated as such in the written Torah – in those days God himself will give Jews to

understand the reason why these decrees should be observed. This is close to the idea that the Messiah is the one who will plant the Torah “into the hearts” of the children of Israel”, according to the prophet Jeremiah, so that they will not be able to forget it. Israel’s children will welcome the inner, hidden meaning of the Torah, *pnimiyut*, in the innermost, the *pnimiyut* of their hearts.

One aspect of the manner in which rabbinical tradition conceives the ultimate revelation is, in my estimation, crucial for the present discussion. Conventionally, the fact that we understand the inner meaning of a decree does not change the validity of this decree. It is not the case for the Messianic revelation. Since a *mitsva* draws its *raison d’être* from pointing towards the *pnimiyut* of the Torah, the unfolding of this *pnimiyut* or the fulfillment of the *mitsva* abolishes its compulsory dimension. One sees an example of that in a passage of the Midrash on the Psalms:



From this perspective, *kashrut* as an obligation appears as part of a historical reading of the Torah associated with *Galut*, exile. In the time of the Redemption, *Geula*, the same Torah will be redisplayed according to a new and eternal economy which sets historical boundaries to such understanding of *kashrut*. The whole passage is based on a pun between the word which means “prisoners” (*asurim*) and the word which means forbidden (*asur*). In general terms, one could say that the manifestation of *olam-ha-ba* associated with the coming of the Messiah must release Jews from the practice of *mitsvot* as so many compulsory deeds without which no participation in the time-to-come is assured. No wonder

Gershom Scholem sees in Paul's "freedom of the children of God" an ultimate form of the anarchic element conveyed by the rabbinical notion of Messianic times. Messianic *mitsvot* are no longer obligations; they are a free response to the revelation of the Messiah.

I understand the rabbinical idea that most Jewish prayer services and festivals will be suppressed in the Messianic age along such lines. The prayers that are understood to remain, namely the prayers of thanksgiving, *tehillot toda* (*Leviticus Rabbah* 9:7, T. Bav.), as well as festivals such as *Kippur* (*Yalqut* on Proverbs 9:2, *ibid.*) are all acts of worship that conserve a meaning as a response of worship to the final deliverance manifested in Messiah. We praise God (*tehillot toda*) for having manifested us the abundance of his kindness and celebrate the expiation (*kippur*) of our sins which are both associated with the coming of the Messiah. Actually, these and other *mitsvot* that are accomplished after the coming of the Messiah might be materially identical to those which were observed before his coming, but they are quintessentially transformed from the inside. I cannot find a better description of what this inner transforming spirit is than the words of Yeshua as reported in John 15:15:

"Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knows not what his lord does: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you" (KJV).

One does not accomplish *mitsvot* for fear of being excluded from God's agenda, as the voluntary prisoner of His unfathomable decrees. If one observes *mitsvot*, one observes them in a spirit of love towards the one who has revealed their ultimate *pnimiyt*, because he comes from the Heavenly Father's womb (John 1:18: *unigenitus Filius, qui est in sinu Patris, ipse enarravit*). Indeed Paul's concept of spiritual freedom in Torah as a removal from its character of being a yoke, is everything but an odd concession to some sort of lazy arbitrariness. This freedom is

meant to release Israel’s potential for genuine, unhampered religious worship as it puts an end to the maddening scruple and rejection of non-Jews which characterized Torah observance in a time of spiritual exile. For freedom could not become the criterion of *mitsvot*-observance, should the non-observance of these *mitsvot* in Messianic times still entail impurity, just as in the time of exile. This in turn implies that the absolute purification which flows from the Messianic revelation, unlike the relative purification associated with the practice of *mistvot* in the time of exile, will no longer be the sole privilege of Jews. A passage of Gen.Rabbah (98) envisages the Messianic age as simultaneously but distinctively directed at Jews and Gentiles. Commenting on Joseph’s prophecy on Judah in Gen.49, the book refers one half-verse to Jews:

He washeth his garments in wine (Gen. 49¹¹) intimates that He (The Messiah) will make clear (שְׁהוּא מְחַוֵּר לָהֶם) (ל"ד) for them words of Torah; And his vesture

Meanwhile, the other half-verse is referred to Gentiles:

(ל"ד) for them words of Torah; And his vesture in the blood of grapes - that He will make clear to them their errors. (שְׁהוּא מְחַוֵּר לָהֶם שְׂעוֹתֵיהֶם) R. Hanin

By “making clear for them” – the Jews - “the words of the Torah” or revealing to Jews its hidden core, the Messiah will gather Jews from their exile. Meanwhile, by “making clear to them”- the Gentiles - “their errors”, the Messiah will give them the opportunity to convert. However, this will not be a conversion to Judaism, an integration into the nation, unlike all the conversions consigned in the written Torah. In the same passage, it is stated that, by contrast to Jews, Gentiles will be required to observe merely 30 *mitsvot* during the Messianic times:

for XI¹⁰), but not Israel. If so, the royal Messiah come, and what will He do. He will come to assemble the exiles of Israel and to give them (the Gentiles) thirty precepts (ל ל ל) as it says, And I said unto them: If ye think good, give me my hire: and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my hire thirty pieces of silver (Zech. XI, 12). Rab. said: This alludes to thirty mighty men. R. Johanan said: It alludes to thirty precepts (i.e. which the Gentiles will undertake to observe when the Messiah comes). R. Johanan's disciples when he said: Does not Rab hold that the verse refers

I could provide more witnesses from the rabbinical tradition, but I think that I have made my point sufficiently clear by now. For the Jewish disciples of Yeshua, accepting, studying and loving the bi-millennial tradition of rabbinical Judaism, belonging to it in one word, does not imply holding fast to one among the various systems of *mitsvot*-observance which characterize the multifarious streams of traditional - that is, non-Messianic - Judaism. If this is a legitimate position, it is because rabbinical Judaism itself provides room for a Messianic understanding of Torah observance when it reflects upon Messianic times. We, Messianic Jews, whether belonging to traditional Christian denominations or not, have to accept the fact that we do not live in the same space-time continuum as traditional Judaism. The recognition that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel, or the understanding that we do not have to wait for Messianic times because they have already begun, will always affect the core of our Torah-practice, whether we like it or not. Even those among us whose life-style is modeled on ultra-Orthodox Jewish circles - there are a few of this kind - cannot but live in a spiritual universe entirely distinct from that of their fellow worshippers.

At this point, I believe I have escaped the trap that I had set before myself at the beginning of this presentation. One can develop a notion of *mitsva*-observance which is simultaneously faithful to the core of the Christian revelation

and the bi-millennial Jewish tradition. However I still need to show how this enables me to answer the question at stake in this year's round of the Helsinki Consultation; namely, what does fulfilling the Torah in Christ mean for me as a Church - a Catholic- Jew? Let me sketch out this answer by way of conclusion.

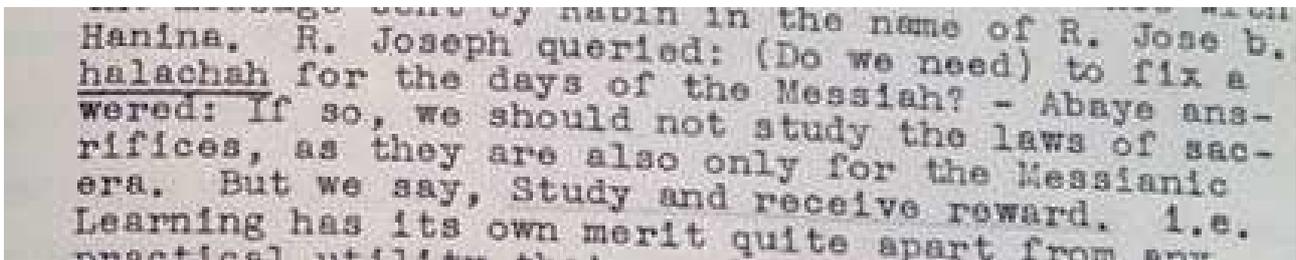
Conclusion

As I said when dealing simultaneously with the figures of Serafim of Sarov and Baal-Shem Tov, fulfilling the Torah in Christ is simply a way of describing what holiness is in the realm of the human. I have no doubt that the Besht fulfilled Torah in Christ since, as I have said, I believe that Christ is invisibly and actively at the heart of Israel's life of worship and prayer. This does not mean however that the One who is hidden should remain so. Israel knows of no more harrowing longing than its longing after the face of its Messiah. We can hardly imagine what power of spiritual regeneration the encounter between the whole nation of Israel and Yeshua, his forever-living Messiah, could release.

I have no doubt either that Serafim of Sarov fulfilled Torah in Christ. He did it as a Gentile who received all his spiritual strength from his intense relationship to a Messiah who was no more the Messiah of Jews than his own. However, the fact that Serafim managed to fulfill Torah as a Gentile does not imply that Jewish disciples of Yeshua should model their life of worship on that of Gentiles to achieve the same goal. It is from the inside of the Jewish tradition that Jews are called to discover in Yeshua the innermost dimension of the Torah that was transmitted to them at the hands of Moses. As I have argued, their life of *mitsvot* observance is called to become the receptacle of the truth and the grace that flow from this Messianic revelation, so as to let the *pnimiyt* of God regenerate the *pnimiyt* of their hearts, intelligence and souls.

Now, if my Church is truly the Church of Yeshua: that is, a Body in which the whole Body of the Messiah subsists, as I believe her to be, she should have a space for this Jewish path towards holiness. I, for example, should be offered the opportunity of observing the Messianic *mitsva* life that pertains to me as Jewish disciple of Yeshua. It does not seem to be the case. But is it true or as simple as that? Is my life of worship as a Jewish Catholic less Messianic, in that sense, than that of Jewish believers who, to a greater or a lesser extent, practice a number of *mitsvot* that are currently in use among traditional Jews?

One of the lines of the rabbinical reflection on Messianic times has to do with numerous laws concerning sacrifices that cannot currently be observed due to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The tractate *Sanhedrin* of the Babylonian Talmud (51b) reports the following exchange between R. Joseph and Abbaye:



Hanina. R. Joseph queried: (Do we need) to fix a halachah for the days of the Messiah? - Abaye answered: If so, we should not study the laws of sacrifices, as they are also only for the Messianic era. But we say, Study and receive reward. i.e. Learning has its own merit quite apart from any practical utility.

It would take too long to explain the reasoning behind this passage, but its meaning is clear: rabbinical tradition does not promote the study of the laws concerning Temple sacrifices as an historical object, but as a basis to conceive of a future which is not the simple reconstitution of the past, since it pertains to the unheard revelation which seals the end of history in the days of the Messiah². The

² If there was a need to establish a special *halakha* or code of conduct corresponding to the days of the Messiah, different from the *halakha* which is currently the goal of the study of sacred texts, one would not study the laws of sacrifices in this era since the *halakha* inferred from them will not be put into practice before the days of the Messiah. Accordingly, even if the understanding and implementation of Messianic *halakha* will be provided when the time comes, this *halakha* should already be integrated into our daily *halakha*, as study is a *mitsva* in itself even if it has no practical consequences.

sacrifices of the old Temple foreshadow the sacrifices of the Temple that Messiah will rebuild. For us, Jewish disciples of Yeshua, can this point towards something other than the sacramental economy of the New Testament, the *berit khadasha* sealed in Yeshua's sacrifice for us? The center of this whole sacramental economy is the Eucharist, which is both sacrifice of expiation, *kippur ha khataim* and prayer of thanksgiving, *tehilla toda*. This ritual sacrifice which recapitulates a great many features of the old sacrifices definitely ushers into a yet unheard of, eschatological reality:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven" (Joh 6:32)

A Church Jew like myself cannot think of a more Messianic *mitsva* than to be given the daily possibility of attending this *tehilla toda*, literally the Eucharist through which the transcendent, immutable *pnimiyut* of the Torah is finally revealed through the *kippur ha khataim* and the grace that flows from it. Is this not the fulfillment of Moses' Torah, when the one who was until now hidden in the life of worship of Israel - the *Afikoman* or *afikomenos*, literally the one who has come and is coming - is finally revealed and lifted up for every child of Israel to see?

True, I do not ordinarily wear a *kippa*, sing in Hebrew or eat kosher. But if there is some truth in what I have been arguing up to this point, this means that my life of worship as a Catholic Jew, as it is, is more Messianic than that of a great number of Messianic Jews who adopt a dismissive attitude towards the central elements of ordinary Catholic worship. The fact remains, however that I – and I am certainly not the only Catholic Jew who feels likewise- miss a space where I could express and live this specifically Messianic, Jewish dimension of Christian worship within my own Church. The religious congregations that go by the name of Messianic Jews are much freer and advanced in that respect. What if we, Church - and Messianic Jews, were to join together our spiritual riches and work on

palliating our deficiencies instead of discussing who among us is the greatest or the definitely most miserable? What if we set out to formulate our own Messianic *halacha*? This common work is the hope of the Helsinki Consultation. True, there are a great number of traps on the way, not counting those which we set against ourselves unintentionally. Still, as I have tried to show here, I am convinced that there is a way ahead.