

**LAW AS GOD'S MERCY
OR DEVINE "GOSPEL"
IN JEWISH THOUGHT
VERSUS CHRISTIAN THOUGHT**

In this lecture I would like to present the way I perceive – the most crucial question concerning the definition of Rabbinic Judaism versus Christianity; especially Early Talmudic Judaism versus Early Christianity – and then, if I may, I would try to conclude something from that for our current life today.

Let me open with this notion: the most prominent element that one can find in the Jewish religion – comparing to any other religion – is the inseparable connection between Halakha and Aggada, law and the heart, law and the spirit.

Those two components conduct themselves – if I may compare them – they are like a usual married couple. They wrestle very often on nonsense, they insult each other, and they hate sometimes bitterly each other. However, if the other partner finally leaves, they miss him, and feel that without him their life alone are with no significance at all.

This is a humoristic glimpse into the ever-lasting internal Jewish predicament concerning the complexity of relationship between Halakha and Aggada – law and the spirit.

This "Catholic Marriage" – as it may be called ironically – of those two elements, is indeed the continuation of the state in Bible: the Biblical law ver-

sus Biblical prophecy. The decisions of the Aggada – like the old prophecy – comes from “hearing”, inner hearing of the *individual*; while the decisions of the law are mainly the outcome of the rational thinking, they belong to the *public domain*.

The spirit, Aggada, is then the voice of the individual – as nobody receives the same “hearing” of the other, as nobody can hear my inner voices; as no one can write my “poetry”, my “music” of life. And the decisions of the ratio, the wisdom’s decisions – represents the public domain.

This point is – to my opinion – the most important point in any living portrayal we would like to provide for Talmudic Judaism *in opposition to* St. Paul’s teaching. Similarly to the tension exists in the relationship between body and soul – as the rabbis understood it – and similarly to the basic structure of the Talmudic sources, the “Jewish” perception was always soaked in this tension – between these two rudiments: Law and Spirit, Halakha and Aggada.

Every extreme attempt to push Judaism to leave one of these two elements outside – was in the end the cause for a new departure from the Jewish identity – and creating a new one.

The ancient Christian route is a good model for comprehending this phenomenon.

In this respect, the main point which is of interest to emphasize, is the rejection to the element of the Halakha in the teaching of St. Paul.

As a Jew, and even as a Jewish Rabbi, St. Paul knew very well about the two sides of the coin which were the components of Rabbinic Judaism, but he was sure that this system – as it was held so strictly by the Rabbis in Eretz Israel – has no farther future anymore.

Now, what is the result of this perception? I would say that what St. Paul has declared is that from now on – we have to cut the traditional Rabbinic connection between these two elements – and we have to live only in the house of “mother”, namely: *Aggada*, without the need of the “father”, namely: *Halakha* (=law).

Let us have a look on what is said in *1 Corinthians 14*:

26: What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification [moral improvement].

27: If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most: three, and each in turn, and one must interpret;

28: but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.

29: Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.

30: But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent.

31: For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted [admonished].

And in *2 Corinthians 3*:

2: You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men;

3: being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but – with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone – but on tablets of human hearts.

That means – as the letter continues beautifully:

4: Such confidence we have through Christ toward God.

5: Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,

6: who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

7: But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was,

8: how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?

9: For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory.

10: For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses [be greater than] it.

11: For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that *which remains* is in glory.

12: Therefore, having such a hope, we use great boldness [courage] in our speech,

13: and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away.

14: But their minds were hardened; for *until this very day* at the reading of the old covenant – the same veil *remains unlifted* – because it is removed [*only!*] in Christ.

15: But to this day whenever *Moses* is read – a veil lies over their heart;

16: but whenever a person turns to the Lord – the veil is taken away.

17: Now *the Lord is the Spirit*, and where the Spirit of the Lord is – there is *liberty* [*from the law!*].

18: But we all, with unveiled face – beholding [seeing] as in a mirror the glory of the Lord – are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory – just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

The meaning of those words is quite clear: St. Paul (assuming that he is the one that wrote those passages, but anyhow it doesn't matter, as we are talking in general about the early christian view in those letters) was fully aware to the fact that the *abandonment* of the element of the Jewish law, means: moving the field of decisions from the ground of the *public domain* to the new platform of *freedom* (Liberty) of *each one* of the *individuals* – freedom to “hear” his own “voices”; to direct his *inner antennas* and get alone the answers for any question – directly from God. The need of the assembly is just to help each one of the individuals to sharpen his message, to find the right direction of *his own antennas*.

The new platform is indeed – in his teaching – the meaning of the new stage of the world after Jesus.

The Biblical account concerning the acceptance of the doctrine of the Jewish Law by Moses from Sinai – in any way that will be interpreted – supposes that the *prophecy* for the individual is always *a channel for transforming information from heaven to earth*, not for the prophet himself – but almost always – a channel for transforming divine information *through* the prophet *to* the simple people; those who *can not* have *direct* connection with God.

This situation of the “people” is what indeed was described clearly in the Bible in “Sinai event” in Ex 20:

18: All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood at a distance.

19: Then they said to Moses, «Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die».

20: Moses said to the people, «Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin».

21: So the people stood at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

This is, indeed – following St. Paul – the meaning of the *veil* on the face of the truth for the *crowd*.

However, now, says St. Paul – time has changed – and this crowd is not blind and deaf anymore – they are not afraid anymore of the direct connection with God, and they can “hear” God’s voice in a straight line for themselves.

At this point, as we have in front of us a new model, we can see the structure of the claim of St. Paul: instead of the model of “God-Moses-Israel”, namely: the model of *one* elevated person who intermediates – and bring the “order” to the public [which means, of course, always *written tablets*, which means in the end always: *system of law*] we have now a new model: each one of the individuals is able to direct his ears to the Divine’s voice and receive his own answers directly from heaven.

The meaning of this claim of St. Paul is indeed, that the law is the *outcome of the weakness of the people*, it is indeed the product of this “*pipe*”: God puts his divine messages of *spirit* in one side of the “pipe” – and we, the people, get it for our own “use” from the other side of the “pipe” in this form: *Law*: system of written tablets.

[And please pay attention to the meaning of the term *Halakha* – which probably has connection with “Lalechet” in Hebrew – that means: walking, walk-

ing on earth – according to the transformed message of spirit].

Now, said St. Paul, when the crowd, all of a sudden, by a miracle, becomes elevated individuals – there is no need for this “pipe” of Law anymore; *the other way around*, it causes now death, harm, damage, to the free spirit.

The spirit can not bear from now on this form of Law, which is always awkward in the way it “translate” the pure voice of God to the earthy world. This Law system is like crutches for a handicap. The moment he doesn’t need it anymore – but somehow has to carry it with him – it becomes a disturbing load; as St. Paul said: it harasses the liberty.

This disturbing element of the law is not unknown even for a well known Modern ultra-orthodox Rabbi like Rabbi Kook (1865-1935, was the chief Rabbi of Eretz Israel in the years 1921-1935), who wrote in his diary these surprising words [by the way: in his diary he talks always about himself, on his inner situation]:

ישנם אנשים גדולים כאלה שמהלך רוחם הוא כל כך נשא, עד שמצידם, אם כל העולם הוא במעמדם, היו המצוות בטלות כמו שיהיה לעתיד לבוא, לימות המשיח או לתחיית המתים, והם בכל זאת מקושרים הם במצוות הרבה מאד, לא למענם, כי אם למען העולם כולו המקושר עמם. וכשהם באים אל הפרטים, לעסוק בהם מצד עצמם, מוצאים הם סתירות נפשיות גדולות כאלה, שהם נמוגים מרוב יגונם (ראי"ה קוק, שמונה קבצים, עמ' קלז פסקה תי').

There are such great people that their spirit’s movement is so elevated, that from their point of view, if all the world would be like them, the commandments should be abandoned, as it will be in the world to come, in the days of Messiah or in the days of resurrection of the dead. However they are [these great people] tied in the commandments very much, not for themselves, but for the whole world around them [the “people”]. And when they [these great people] come to the details [small details of the Law system]

to deal with them as they are, they find [themselves] is such enormous inner contradictions that causes them to be fade away in their grief (Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, Shemona Kvatzim, p. 137, no. 410).

One can recognize in this touching text the sheer Jewish answer for St. Paul: You are right, says Rabbi Kook, but *still* there is a strong need for the crowd to have system of law, you can not remove this “pipe” at that moment. Please wait. It is on the way – but not exactly now.

In this point of the discussion, if we have to ask a rational person, who has no bias for any side of the participants in the heated discussion: «Tell us please, what do you think about this dispute?»

He would say probably: if I understand you religions right – you are not disagreeing on the *content* of the message – but on the *means*, on the tools – on the *way* the messages has to be transformed to the people.

The content of the divine message is: goodness, gentleness, pureness, holiness, and so on, and concerning that there is no debate at all.

Then – he would ask – I don’t get you really guys: why are you fighting? You just have to go down to the street, and look up together: which system really works? In which “streets” people are really receiving the divine messages and practicing it better? It is, indeed, purely a *functional* question – he would say.

However, if the answer from the “street” would be a more complicated: say, for some people *this* system works better and for the others *the other one* – then you guys, he will say, if you really care for

the people, if you really care for the realization of the Lord words, if you are really humble, and you are not busy with your own self-identity – then the priests and the rabbis (and Imams, and so on and so forth) should cooperate under *one* roof – and build a “synagogue-church” that will give the option to each one of the individuals to be encouraged to walk in his own path (and it might also be, that even that depends on different periods in one’s own life).

The fact that each one of those religious institutions is still “closed” in his own fortress, self-assurance, and in such a “childish” way still deny the other option – is of course – a considerable sign that we all have completely lost our connection to the divine voice, we simply lost our true believe many years ago – and we are stuck in a mud of meaningless game which we call “religion” – a “game” which indeed has created chaos in the past history – and right now, just in front of us, we can see how denying the truth of another religion is the reason for creating another type of violence and disorder.

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