

THE MISSION OF ISRAEL: A VIEW FROM WITHIN

*By Ze'ev Falk **

Jewish tradition has never overlooked the spiritual needs of mankind, though its main concern was always the improvement of the world from within, by fulfilling the task especially assigned to the people of Israel! ¹ Parallel to and equal in importance with the Covenant of Sinai Judaism proclaims the existence of a system of "Noahide Commandments" providing an ethical programme for humanity. True, Jewish consciousness does not feel the urge to expand by bringing its message to all men. Rather its view is directed towards internalization and deepening of its spirituality.

It is part of an attitude permeating the total way of life, by offering *pars pro toto* and by dealing with particulars for the sake of the universal. Thus the various commandments represent the totality of life to be hallowed, Sabbath and festivals are meant to radiate into the work-days, the place of prayer must be used as an example for everyday life with God, the election of priests is a means for the sanctification of all Israel, and, finally, the chosenness of the latter is a step in the gathering of mankind to the service of God.

In what sense, therefore, can we speak of the "mission" of Israel? It seems that before adopting this term we must go back to its origin, i.e. the order

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1. Cf. Falk, *Israel's Message to the World*, in: *Mélanges André Neher*, Paris 1975, pp. 57-66.

of Jesus to his disciples: "Go you therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you,"² or: "and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."³

The two elements, the teaching and the witnessing, are indeed, part of the Jewish way of life, however they are part of a great number of commandments and do not occupy the central place in religious observance, as prescribed in Christianity. While the movement of the Christian mission is a centrifugal and extrovert one, the corresponding movement in Judaism is centripetal and spiralling leading to introspection and internalization. There can, indeed, be no relation to God without a corresponding inter-human dimension, but it is used to take home the experience and to come back from the encounter to one's centre deeper and more enriched.

Both the Christian teaching and witnessing make use of speech and preaching; Judaism, on the other hand, thinks more of acts and of intention than of words and dogma. When Abraham made his great sacrifice of faith he did not speak but was silent and when Job felt near to God he realized that "God takes speech away from the faithful."⁴

The term "mission" should not, therefore, be used with regard to Judaism without a clear definition distinguishing between the Christian idea and its Jewish counterpart. In the context of Jewish tradition it can only be used in a multi-dimensional and indirect sense describing Jewish concern for all mankind without losing the main responsibility for oneself and one's own people. Judaism as a system of life is primarily directed towards the people born into the covenant, though there is possibility for proselytes to join in this framework. The criterion of "chosenness" is the submission to Torah, which in its turn is the special responsibility and privilege of Israel.

Any discussion of the "Mission of Israel," therefore, must start with the meaning of Torah, especially with the problem of a singular or multi-dimensional meaning of Torah. On the one hand Torah may be understood as the most exclusive quality of Jewish existence, forming the unbridgeable abyss between Israel and the Nations. On the other hand, just this Torah could be conceived as the unifying force of the world, including many more meanings than, say, the literal or the legal sense and enabling any human being to approach God in the way appropriate to him.

2. Mt. 28 : 19-20.

3. Acts. 1 : 8.

4. Job. 12:20.

While many expressions may be traced proving the former attitude, Jewish tradition has equally preserved a more universalistic approach to Torah, as we will try to show in the following.

Let us start with the famous statement of Rabbi Ishmael, living during the first part of the second century C.E. Referring to Jer. 23:29 he describes the revelation at Mount Sinai:

“Is not my word like fire, says God, and like a hammer which breaks the rock into pieces? — Just as the hammer itself bursts forth into many sparks, every word emanating from God bursts into seventy languages.”⁵

This metaphor is based on the idea that the divine message was not easily absorbed by the people, but was hammered into them. Torah was meant to imprint the ideals of Sinai upon an otherwise stiff-necked people. By transforming the rock into an image of “the kingdom of priests and a holy nation” a witness was called for the Kingdom of God on earth.

However, when the divine word met with human finitude there were many side-effects, spreading light and inspiration for the benefit of all men. The process just described is the underlying assumption of the great exegetical effort of the rabbis, especially those of the School of Rabbi Ishmael, allowing a pluralistic attitude in the academy. Moreover, the reference to the seventy languages is an important extension, hinting not only at the various meanings within Jewish tradition but equally to parallel meaning for the seventy nations of the world.

It was just the initial unresponsiveness of the people of Israel which created the sparks speaking to humanity as well. Had Torah been easily accepted, had it been in the line of Israel’s natural inclination, there would have been little hope for others. Just because of the tension between Torah and people it became clear that it was not the creation of the latter and that it could be adopted by everyman.

The universal message of Torah expresses itself also during the covenant of Shechem, where an altar was to be erected “and you shall write upon the stones all the words of this Torah very plainly.”⁶ This is taken to mean:

“One wrote upon them all the words of this Torah in seventy languages, as it is said: very plainly.”⁷

5. Talmud Shabbat 88b.

6. Deut. 27 : 8.

7. Mishna Soṭah 7 : 5.

Thus, the covenant was not limited to the people of Israel only but included an invitation to all nations. Torah, constituting the conditions binding upon the vassal, was to be exhibited in public to express their further universal meanings. Moreover, the presentation in a great number of languages brought into the open many nuances which were perhaps hidden in the original text.

Following this idea, the rabbis added the following:

“The nations of the world sent their notaries to transcribe the text on the stones in seventy languages.”⁸

This was another occasion to stress the mission of Israel. Torah was not only meant to guide other nations as well as the Jews, but the former indeed, cared to study it. This homily binds those Gentiles who came to study Jewish law and tradition, taking Torah as a teaching intended for them as well as for the Jewish people.

To sum up the ideas so far expressed, the election of Israel as those who had been given Torah, need not be understood exclusively. Although the covenant of Sinai had been concluded with one particular people at a specific stage of history, its appeal went beyond that, including mankind at large. Every nation was invited to accept the teaching, not necessarily in its totality and by full conversion into the faith. Particularity and universality of Torah are thus co-existent dimensions of the divine message, directed simultaneously to Israel and to the world.

As already said, this view was not the only one, taking into consideration the sad experience of the Jewish people with most of the Gentiles. In some versions of the above story the text, therefore, goes on as follows:

“At that time judgment was delivered to the nations of the world to fall into the lowest pit.”

According to this gloss, the story, instead of showing the merit of the Gentiles, accused them of knowingly failing to abide by Torah. They had had the opportunity and not made use of it, which is the cause of their condemnation. We have called this addition a gloss, for its authorship can be traced and distinguished from the earlier part of the text, dating from the second century C.E.

The negative and exclusive attitude was expressed by Rabbi Johanan (c. 180-c.279), head of a Talmud academy, who probably reacted upon Christian literary activities in Galilee.

8. Tosefta Sotah 8:6; Jer. Talmud Sotah 7:5, 21 d; Bab. Talmud Sotah 35 b.

'Rabbi Samuel b. Nahmani in the name of R. Johanan quoted Is. 33 : 12 — and the peoples will be as if burned to lime — they received their death sentence from the plaster mentioned in Deut. 27 : 4.

Rabbi Abba b. Kahana in the name of R. Johanan quoted Is. 60:12— those nations shall be utterly laid waste — from Mount Horeb (literally : waste) they received their death sentence.”⁹

According to the first version, the nations had forfeited their life by not abiding by Torah, as made known to them on the plastered stones. The same word, *sid*, is used both for plaster and for lime, giving rise to the idea that the punishment was similar to the offence. The second version relies on the synonym for Mount Sinai, *Horeb*, which points to the punishment.

These traditions show Rabbi Johanan stressing the initial opportunities for all nations to join in Jewish tradition and the cause for their exclusion from this privilege. According to his view the Gentiles had rejected Torah once and for all and could not, therefore, claim any share in it. It is as if to say that whatever the meaning of Torah had been, history stood between the Jewish people and the other nations. The wheel, in his view, could not be turned back, salvation for the Gentiles being possible only by full conversion to the Jewish faith.

Rabbi Johanan expresses the same idea with respect to Deut. 33:2 and Hab. 3:3:

“God came from Sinai and dawned from Se’ir upon them, he shone forth from Mount Paran . . .”

“God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran . . .”

Why is God in Se’ir and what does he seek in Paran? This teaches us that God had offered Torah to all nations and languages, but that they all had refused, until he came to Israel who accepted it.”¹⁰

This thesis about the rejection of the nations, seems to be an answer to the Christian argument regarding the rejection of Jesus by the Jews. It was the claim of the new covenant that those believing in it had occupied the place of the people of Israel and that the latter had been rejected by God.¹¹ The reply made by Rabbi Johanan was payment in kind : he proclaimed the rejection of the Gentiles being the result of this rejection of Torah. There was no merit in the study of Torah by Christians ; on the contrary :

9. Jer. Talmud Soṭah, 1. c.

10. Bab. Talmud Avodah Zarah 2 b.

11. Cf. F.E. Talmage (ed.) *Disputation and Dialogue*, New York 1975 passim.

“A Gentile engaged in Torah is liable of death punishment, for Deut. 33 : 4 says : Moses commanded us Torah as an inheritance of the assembly of Jacob — it is our inheritance, not theirs.”¹²

Rabbi Johanan, obviously, did not prohibit the study of Torah by a Gentile preparing for conversion. Rather, his opposition must have been directed against a partial identification with Jewish tradition, such as practised by Christians from among the Gentiles. His statement is the reply to the Christian claim of being “Versus Israel” and a deviation from a more liberal view of the second century authority Rabbi Meir.¹³

“How do we know that even a Gentile who is engaged in Torah is like the High Priest? Lev. 18 : 5 says : You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which man shall live : I am God — the text does not say : Priests, Levites and Israelites shall live, but *man*.”¹⁴

Rabbi Meir, probably, did not feel the danger of Paul’s claim that Christianity had taken over from Judaism, so that he did not react unfavourably against Gentiles studying Torah. His was a more inclusive and universalist view, considering the message of Sinai to be addressed to everyman.¹⁵ According to this view a Gentile may indeed fulfil the whole or part of Torah without formally becoming a proselyte, and thereby become as worthy in the eyes of God as any Israelite. This is obviously a reference to the Christians from the nations and expresses a great tolerance.

The Problem with Christianity, however, was the claim of the latter to have taken the place of Judaism and having inherited its promises. It was this element which caused Rabbi Johanan and others to deviate from the teaching of their predecessors. The present attitude of Gentiles to Torah, they maintained, was actually a rejection of the commandments, at least of the ritual ones, and excluded them from sharing in Torah.

Nevertheless, more universalist views were equally expressed in the academy. Even in face of Christian contempt for Judaism, the rabbis maintained a remarkable objectivity, as shown, for instance, by one of Rabbi Johanan’s disciples, Rabbi Hanina b. Papa, or one of his younger contemporaries, Rabbi Simlai :

12. Bab. Talmud Sanhedrin 59 a.

13. According to another version the dictum was made by third century Rabbi Jeremiah, cf. E.E. Urbach, *The Sages, their Concepts and Beliefs*, Jerusalem 1969, ch. 16, n. 68.

14. Bab. Avodah Zarah 3 a.

15. Tosafot *ibid.* s.v. *she’afilu*, trying to harmonize the views of Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Johanan, *non sequitur*.

“In future God will bring a Torah scroll, put it on his lap and call all those engaged in it to come and take their reward. The Gentiles then come in a crowd, as described in Is. 43: 9... and argue before God that they had not been given Torah and that they had not had opportunity to accept it. Thereupon Rabbi Johanan is quoted that Torah had indeed been offered to the nations but been rejected by them. Therefore, the argument of the Gentiles is corrected and goes: Master of the Universe, did you also invert the mountain over us like a tank, as you did to Israel, and did we then refuse to accept Torah?”¹⁶

The underlying idea in this homily is the imposition of Torah upon Israel by force. Although the covenant of Sinai takes the form of an agreement between God and Israel, there cannot, really, be any independent decision of man vis-a-vis God, so that even the agreement is not based on free will. This is described by Rabbi Abdimi b. Hassa as the inversion of the mountain over the people like a tank and the threat to kill them if they are unwilling to accept Torah. Since this idea raises doubt as to the validity of the law, the view is then quoted that during the Babylonian exile the Jewish people had, finally, assumed the duties of Torah out of this free will.¹⁷

But coming back to the argument of the Gentiles, it really touches the essence of election. If it could be said that Israel had willingly submitted to the divine rule, they could not make any claim. However, if Israel had become a partner to the covenant by divine direction only, even against its will, there could be a claim for not having had an equal opportunity.¹⁸

Thus, according to the opinions of those rabbis of the fourth century, the nations could perhaps be blamed for their behaviour in history but not for their rejection of Torah.¹⁹ If therefore, they were willing to change their behaviour and to share in Torah at a later stage, there was, in their views, no reason for discouraging them.

Against this background we should, interpret another controversy in the second century C.E. traditions:

“A Torah scroll written by a Gentile — one tradition says, it should be burned; another one says, it should be buried; a third tradition says, it may be used for reading... The first is the view of Rabbi Eliezer that a Gentile usually has an idolatrous intention, the second is the view quoted by Rav Hamnuna... that Torah scrolls, phylacteries and door-post inscriptions written by a sectarian, informer, Gentile, slave, woman, minor, Samaritan or apostate

16. Bab. Talmud Avodah Zarah 2 a.b.

17. Bab. Talmud Sabbath 88a.

18. On the different attitudes to election cf. Urbach, *The Sages*, ch. 16, n.5 ff.

19. Cf. Tosafot *Sotah* 35b, s.v. *we'al*.

are unfit for religious use . . . The third is the view (of Rabban Simon b. Gamliel) saying : One may purchase Bible texts from a Gentile at any place, provided that they are properly written. There was a cave in Sidon (Lebanon), where a Gentile used to write Bible texts and R. Simon b. Gamliel permitted to buy them.”²⁰

These texts were probably translations of the Bible. Rabban Simon b. Gamliel had, indeed, permitted the writing of the Bible in Greek,²¹ and his colleagues extended this ruling to other languages. It is, therefore, understandable that Jews were also allowed to purchase Bible texts written by Gentiles, say: Christians, and use them for prayer and study.

The recognition of foreign languages as legitimate media for the spreading of Torah opened the door for Jewish-Gentile collaboration. If revelation, originally, had included the languages of the nations, why not make use of these languages in the service? On the other hand, there was the danger of Christian or sectarian glosses creeping into the text, and this caused the alternative rulings against using these books. In any case, the Jewish and Christian communities of Sidon must have had close contacts, the book trade being just an example of them.

The mission of Israel, therefore, is linked with the understanding of Torah. Just as Moses did not claim a monopoly over prophecy for himself,²² the rabbis did not exclude the possibility of prophecy among Gentiles :

And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses — in Israel none has arisen but among the nations there has arisen a prophet, i.e. Bileam b. Beor . . . ”²³

Jewish tradition merely defines the relationship between God and the people of Israel without denying any parallel relationship with other nations. Likewise, the Jewish interpretation of the Bible is meant for the use of Jews but does not exclude additional and parallel interpretations for the use of Gentiles. Torah, having seventy different faces, has message to everyman, which may be different from that laid down in Jewish *Halakhah* and *Agadah*. The true idea of the mission of Israel is linked with pluralism: Torah has not only six-hundred thousand different aspects, represented by each of the sons of Israel standing at Mount Sinai, but in addition also seventy further aspects, represented by the nations of the earth. Its full meaning can be brought out by study, by listening and by humility in an academy reaching out to total humanity.

20. Bab. Talmud Gittin 45b, cf. Tosefta Avodah Zarah 3 : 6-7.

21. Mishna Megilah 1:8.

22. Num. 11 : 29.

23. Sifre Deut. 34 : 10 (357).