

# Creating Torah

## Introduction. On living and creating the Torah.

In the title of this presentation, we apply to Torah two gerund forms: ‘creating’ and ‘living’. They are used as *nouns* – as subjects in a sentence – but they derive from *verbs* and so capture the dynamics. We see Torah as such a “verbal subject/object”: dynamic, not static – something like ‘Torahing’. Last year in Berlin, we talked about the *intrinsic* dynamics of Torah, which makes it a paradox. <sup>Slide 1</sup> Paradox engages us, when we try to solve it, in a sort of Jacob’s fight with God. By this, the hidden dynamics of paradox gets expressed externally – through us. This year we’d like to focus on this *extrinsic*, externalized dynamics of Torah: how it is changed by us and how it changes us. The former is *creating* the Torah, the latter, *living* the Torah.

Our presentation is set up as a dialogue between two presenters: Vladimir Pikman and myself, Boris Balter. Vladimir looks at our theme more from the angle of ‘living the Torah’, while I look at it in the perspective of ‘creating the Torah’. Notwithstanding this difference, our discussions while preparing this presentation have convinced us that we share the essential core from which grow these different perspectives.

Last year in Berlin, we also talked about the universality of Torah. Later on, we’ll dwell more on Torah as entire Universe. For the moment, note only that Torah as a ‘universal paradox’ is something different from things and notions that we usually meet. Torah lives both inside and outside us and thus transcends the division between the subject and object of change – the division between the mover and the moved. <sup>Slide 2</sup> However, the split between subject and object is the fundamental optics through which we view the world. Its inapplicability to Torah means that we can’t draw a hard line between fulfilling Torah and creating Torah. This duality is implied in Christ’s words in Mat. 5:17 - ‘I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill’. To fulfill is both to *perform* and to *change* by filling to fullness. Performing is living the Torah, filling the Torah is creating it.

In this view, we simply can’t avoid changing the Torah since we ourselves change while living the Torah and moving along the Way of Christianity. It might seem too bold to talk about our creating the Torah – after all, it is God Who created it! However, God has called us to be His collaborators in His design of the world – as said in Gen. 2:15, לְעִבְדָּךָ, to *work* the world. This is especially true for Christians (see, e.g., Eph. 1) – that’s why the first Christians called themselves ‘called’. Working the Universe means working the Torah. To put it in other words, it is letting God work through us (due to the duality between subject and object). It is our dialogue with God.

Living and changing the Torah are as inextricably tied to each other as are the *preservation* and *innovation* in the genetics of our body. <sup>Slide 3</sup> Last year in Berlin we considered such genetic analogues of the spiritual processes related to Torah. I’ll show two slides from the last year’s presentation. The first one illustrates the genetic processes combining preservation and innovation. The second one illustrates the balance between OT and NT in the life of a Jewish Christian. <sup>Slide 4</sup> These slides are a snapshot of what was shown in that presentation in dynamics. However, even in this way, there is a lot of in-depth details in these slides. We have no time to concentrate on them, but note the overall similarity of these two models of so different processes.

The dynamical, dialogical view of Torah makes it look not as a set of fixed commandments, but rather as a set of musical scores designed for being performed. Last year in Berlin we noted that musical, wavelike quality is an essential feature of Torah. We considered Psalter as another embodiment of Torah, the ‘musical Torah’. Psalter is different from commandments in form, but carries the same contents. Osip Mandelstam wrote in his ‘Dante Talk’ about the ‘perceiving performance’ of Divine Comedy by its readers. If we perform the Torah in this way, it will lend a musical quality to our lives.

Let us now consider the notion of mitzvot which is inseparably tied to our notion of Torah. The dynamical view of Torah implies that even when mitzvot are constant in form, like Ten Commandments, they can change contents. The examples of such change were given by Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5). What is constant in mitzvot, then? Not the way of their practical realization, but something deeper: the source point whence they proceed and to which they lead. In the terminology of Revelation, this is the  $\Omega$  point – Universal Christ <sup>Slide 5</sup> – which is at the same time the  $A$  point that ‘was in the beginning’, as John says in the beginning of his gospel (John 1:1). The essence of mitzvot is the *criterion, the judgment of what is good and bad*. It is the projection of the Last Judgment from the  $\Omega$  point, which is out of time, to the time in which we live.

This cosmic perspective projects to the *collective* perspective: to Torah in Jewish history or Torah in the Christian Church. Then, it projects to the *personal* perspective. Most of what we have said is applicable to personal life, but Torah is usually perceived as a collective notion – something bestowed on Jewish people, or even on entire creation. We need to add the personal level to this view. *Living* the Torah means translating it from the collective or universal to personal existence. *Creating* the Torah is the complementary process: translating the music written by one’s personal life to the collective level, *ecclesifying* it.

We members of the Helsinki group have some experience of this process (albeit at a micro-scale). We are trying to share our personal “Torahs” and make them a common property of the group, notwithstanding the huge cultural and confessional barriers which presumably would divide us. My own feeling is that this sharing is best done in the ‘musical’, ‘wave-like’ form. It is much more difficult to make compatible the ‘particle-like’ sides of Torahs, that is, commandments that we take on ourselves. Things made of particles fight for the place they would occupy, whereas waves peacefully coexist in the ether.

## 1. Torah is a cosmic notion. Creative collaboration of creature with God includes creating Torah.

Understood traditionally, in a narrow sense, Torah is a set of rules, mitzvot. From ancient time Torah was also understood in a complementary, wide sense: as equivalent to the entire Universe. Vladimir Pikman provided some examples of this. Of course, I mean the spiritual Universe, without which the material Universe would be dead as a body without spirit (or even nonexistent). The spiritual Universe is tied together by its center – a node to which everything converges and which holds everything together. This center can be called *Law*, without which everything would break apart. In this way, any material system would scatter if it were not kept together by common physical laws. Alternatively, the center can be called *Logos*, that is, the logical tie of the Universe. <sup>Slide 6</sup> This universal Logos, as stated in John’s Gospel (John 1:1), is just the *Universal Christ*. As St. Paul says in the letter to Colossians (Col. 1:17), ‘*by Him all things consist*’. *He* is the node that keeps everything together. And it is from this node that everything moves. Vladimir, too, mentions this point.

Seeing Christ as an acme of Torah may seem to deprive Torah of its dynamics, because Christ is eternal. We tend to equate ‘eternal’ with ‘unchanged’. However, the Fathers of the Church (e.g., Maximus the Confessor) didn’t see Christ as something fixed <sup>Slide 7</sup>: Christ is a motion so intense that, paradoxically, it is rest (or, rather, peace, *shalom*). Our calling to creatively collaborate with God was set in OT, in Gen. 1-2. It is understood in NT as a calling to become parts of Christ. St. Paul expressed it in this way: ‘we, many, are one body in Christ’ (Rom. 12:5) and ‘your bodies are the members of Christ’ (1Cor. 6:15). Therefore, our call to participate in Creation is a call to create Torah and so to create Christ which is almost inconceivable. Well, if we are members of Christ (even if

only in eschatological perspective), we kind of create Him by creating ourselves. Or, in other words, we are letting ourselves to be created by God. In the subject-to-object duality perspective, this is saying the same thing.

With all due respect to the Torah, the creative attitude toward it is what Jesus proclaims in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5:19). *‘Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven’*. The Greek words ὃς δ’ ἂν ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ are translated in KJV as ‘whosoever shall do and teach’. This translation does not do full justice to the richness of Greek connotations. In Russian Bible, ποιήσῃ is translated not as ‘do’ but as stemming from ‘create’. This captures an essential nuance of the Greek text. Full-filling the ‘law and the prophets’ is filling the Torah to its eschatological fullness, that is, extending, developing, creating the Torah.

Note also that the Greek word ποιήσῃ, translated as ‘do’ or ‘create’, has the same root as ‘poetry’. This is not a coincidence. Poetry is an archetype of creation realized through words, λόγοι. We shouldn’t look on creation in words as on some inferior form of creation. Christ said: ‘Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away’ (Mat. 24:35). Christ Himself is called Word – a carrier of meaning. So, our attitude toward Torah creation has to learn from our experience in word creation – in poetry. <sup>Slide 8</sup> Psalter is a good ferryman for that. Torah creation ought to be poetic, musical, wavelike. Only then it will speak to heart, and without it any mitzvot, however good, would dry themselves up. That’s what Christ criticized in Pharisees. Depriving Torah of its Psalter-like, poetic side is a distortion of God’s design of the Universe. When we perceive the beauty of God’s creation, as in Ps. 104, only then we are true to His design of the Universe and of ourselves. Then, we read the *poetry that He has written for us*. As Vladimir says in his part of this presentation, this is essentially a ‘love poetry’: expression of God’s heart and intention toward us.

## 2. Realization of God’s Design: from “natural law” to collective Torah to created, personalized Law.

Human participation in creating the Torah is not limited to spiritual realm only. Paul’s letter to Romans (Rom. 2:14) mentions a “natural law” – an analog of Torah which exists in nature not as commandments but in a distributed, wavelike form. <sup>Slide 9</sup> I think, this is what W. H. Auden meant in his famous verse. It is a fusion of physical and moral natural laws. It is a major part of creative collaboration with God. When this collaboration is mentioned in Genesis (Gen. 1:28), it is described, as usual in OT, in terms of natural rather than spiritual activities. Also, in Hebrew text and according to OT mentality, it is understood as *dominion* over nature. I think, in NT perspective, it should be understood rather as *ruling, conducting* nature. This implies extending, amplifying and completing the natural law and finally elevating it to the Torah height.

Regrettably, the fallen humanity has understood its mission towards nature in the crudest possible way: as *violating* nature rather than *domesticating* it. The practical facet of ruling the nature (science, engineering etc.) is our only line of advance. It is completely cut off its religious root. Yes, we are able to creatively supplement what exists in physical nature, but this does not filter into the moral sphere. As a result, our creativity is directed to external ‘things’. Creativity directed to ourselves is practically absent. As a kickback, without connection to the *moral* law, our creativity in *natural* law weighs it down, rather than elevates it. Creating Torah is impossible without curing this

rupture. <sup>Slide 10</sup> The so-called Russian cosmism (Fedorov, Tsiolkovsky, Vernadsky, Teilhard de Chardin et al.) seeks to restore the link.

Including natural law into Torah creation activity reminds us that it is not just a personal task. We might fancy that we may be *morally* creative on our own, but for creativeness in the *physical* realm this is just inconceivable. So let us consider the interplay between individual and collective Torah creation. As mentioned last year in Berlin, Torah can be viewed as having 3 layers: personal, collective (or national), and universal (or cosmic). In OT, Torah develops mainly in the collective layer, as “OT church” and from there percolates to the personal layer. In NT, it is vice versa. However, even in NT, the “personal Torah” can’t be just subjective – it should be ecclesifiable. <sup>Slide 11</sup> Let us consider this using the parallel between Torah and Psalter. In creating a ‘personal Torah’, thoughts, emotions, vital events will self-organize into a parallel, non-verbalized, wavelike form – a ‘personal Psalter’. Personal Psalters can be put together as easily as individual psalms in the Psalter, whereas the codified forms of different ‘Torahs’ understood as commandments are hard to combine. Therefore, at the collective level it is difficult to transcend the barriers between different historically emerged forms of Torah, but at the personal level it is easily done. At the collective level, the differences in Torah views produce the repulsion and confrontation between communities holding these views. In contrast, on the personal level, the differences, paradoxically, generate mutual attraction. We, the members of the Helsinki group, are a living testimony to that.

I am not playing down the observance of mitzvot – whatever these be. Observance is a mode of creation: creating oneself. We should only remember that any specific form of mitzvot observance is not a *goal* – it is a *means*. The *goal* is to change ourselves. While we are changing, our reference frame for perceiving Torah changes, too. Changing the perspective means changing Torah. This principle of relativity is common in studies of the natural laws, but it has not yet been transferred to studies of Torah. In physics, we discover that motion produces change even in such fundamental characteristics as mass. Analogously, if we move in spirit, our observance can’t remain the same – neither throughout one’s personal life, nor from generation to generation. The idea mentioned by Vladimir that „God Himself does the mitzvot that He commands Israel to observe” means that these mitzvot simply can’t be such fixed, down-to-the-earth rule observances as many think they are. At least, not if we comprehend the *full* sense of these mitzvot. We should strive toward this full sense and not satisfy ourselves with the minimum.

### **3. The eschatological goal of Torah creation: participation in Universal Christ. It defines the right perspective on what to do now.**

When we tackle the problem of personal activity in Torah creation, we hit on the well-known contradiction between the human freedom and the predetermined God’s design. In fact, it is rather a paradox than a contradiction. Creating Torah is unpredictable since it includes human freedom. However, we know where we go in the big, universal picture: towards the Universal Christ. <sup>Slide 12</sup> The Universal Christ as Alpha and Omega is the beginning and the end of all movement in the Universe, including our own creative activity. In particular, our free activity in Torah creation is powered by Him.

At the same time, paradoxically, the Universal Christ is outside this movement in time. He is the goal reached, shalom established. Christ is the perfect Torah incarnate, <sup>Slide 13</sup> the final, completed, perfected, full-filled Torah. In the Greek NT, this goal is described by the word τέλειος which is both final/definitive, and perfect. So the process of Torah creation/completion, when carried to its final fullness, is just Christ. From St. Paul to Maximus the Confessor to Teilhard de Chardin, the Universal Christ is seen not only as a *goal* distinct from us – the wayfarers – but as a *Body* whose parts we become. On our

human freedom depends what these parts will be – what the final Torah will be. <sup>Slide 14</sup> As Vladimir mentions, even in OT what is Torah depends on human decision – on how sages see what is Torah. However, the immutable goal shapes our freedom – in particular, directs us to implement the unity of Torah in our lives following the pattern of their unity in Christ. Or, in terms of Vladimir’s presentation, ‘in the end, a sage becomes the Torah incarnate’. This is how predestination and freedom interact.

<sup>Slide 15</sup> This fulfilled state, although already (or always) existing in eternity, is, of course, still ahead of us in time, in this world. However, the point  $\Omega$  contains in a folded, convoluted form the entire richness of creation. There are threads that already connect us to  $\Omega$  point. Due to them, we can look at current things as if from the  $\Omega$  point. Of course, this view, in St. Paul’s words, is as through a dim glass, conjecturally (1Cor. 13:12). Still, it involves transferring the center of our perspective from ourselves, our time and our place to the center of God’s perspective in His design. This is the *only* right perspective for looking at our present problems. And this is the only right perspective for viewing Torah. As noted above, interpreting Torah, performing it and creating it are essentially one and the same. Therefore, learning to place one’s viewpoint in the  $\Omega$  point seems to me an important mitzvah, maybe even an essential prerequisite for correct performance of all other mitzvot.

#### **4. Jewish mitzvot: roots that are both a brake and a thruster for creative impulse. To survive, they must be transfigured.**

<sup>Slide 16</sup> We have embedded the issue of Torah creation into the picture that includes the time dimension, the multilevel structure (personal, collective, universal), the Christ-Torah parallel and other things. Now, what is the specifically Jewish part in this grand picture? To answer, we should remember, first of all, that both the Torah and the Jewishness are paradoxical notions, as agreed at our previous meetings. Paradox transcends the opposition between the part and the whole. So it was in OT when Jews were both a small part of the humankind and the entire humankind (‘Adam’) rolled into one nation-church. So it is in NT, where Jewishness is diffused in the Church as in the symbolical Body of Christ. What is specifically Jewish in the Church? Nothing and everything – one particularly feels it when one assists at a Christian liturgy and hears the names of Jewish saints and sees Jews represented on icons. So it will be in the  $\Omega$  point, when the universal Body of Christ acquires a literal rather than symbolic sense. This entire Body will be no less Jewish than the physical body of Yeshua from Nazareth when He walked on earth. That’s why this new heaven and earth is called New Jerusalem. Therefore, we shouldn’t repeat the error of OT Jews and degrade the Jewishness by flattening its paradoxical curves and by segregating it from the wholeness, from Pleroma.

<sup>Slide 17</sup> Is there a place for such specific things as Jewish mitzvot in this grand, universal perspective? Yes, because creativity always feeds from some roots: nothing is created from scratch (except what God creates). The roots of Torah creativity are in OT mitzvot. Mitzvot are answers to some very practical problems set by the dissonance between humans as they *are* and humans as they are *designed by God* to be His collaborators. These problems won’t suddenly vanish into the blue on our way to  $\Omega$  point: they can only be creatively transfigured and transcended. This can’t be done without first learning the deep existential roots of these problems. The mitzvot teach us by setting a *mirror* where we see ourselves as we try to fulfill even ‘one jot or one tittle’. For example, we have first to absorb the deep psychological and sociological reasons for the OT mitzvah ‘an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth’. If we just discard it as obsolete, we won’t understand the fullness of its heavenly extension in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5:39): ‘whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also’.

New creation both leans on the old creation and pushes it away as a springboard, in order to move forward. The opposition between traditional, collective Torah and creative, personalized Torah is both a check on creation and a source of energy for it, generated by the meeting of polarities. In this dynamics, collective mitzvot change ‘on the run’ when they get inside a person. As W. H. Auden wrote in his ‘In Memory of W. B. Yeats’, the words of the dead are modified in the guts of the living. Therefore, it is useless to try to fulfill the *letter*. As St. Paul said, developing Christ’s message, ‘the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life’ (2Cor. 3:6).

Torah is so paradoxical that it is difficult even to *speak* about it. As T. S. Eliot said in ‘Burnt Norton’, ‘Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden, / Under the tension, slip, slide, perish, / Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, / Will not stay still’. One may wonder, how one can *fulfill* something as elusive. However, this wonder stems from ignoring the poetic, wave-like hypostasis of Torah. [Let me paraphrase once more the ‘Dante Talk’ by Osip Mandelstam. ‘We perform just what cannot be performed, that is, nature’s text brought to a standstill, and we have forgotten how to perform the only thing which by its structure yields to creative performance, namely, the impulses, intentions, and amplitudes of oscillations’. Oscillations are waves. I substituted the word ‘perform’ for Mandelstam’s ‘describe’ and substituted the ‘creative performance’ for Mandelstam’s ‘poetic representation’. I hope, in doing this, I’m true to the spirit of this brilliant opus, because, for a poet, to describe is to create, poetry is ποιησις, creation. Applying this to mitzvot issue, we can say that] trying to perform God’s text brought to a standstill is futile: the only thing in it which yields to our efforts is its creative dynamic potential. As Vladimir has said citing the Bereshit Rabba, ‘Not a day passes in which the Holy One, blessed be He, does not teach a new law’. We are to be with Him in this eternal novelty.