

WHAT MAKES A JEW "JEWISH" ?

« Sons and Daughters of Our People Israel, Everywhere : What makes a Jew 'Jewish' ? »

This was the opening question by which the Rebbe Menahel Mendel Schneerson, the 7th leader of the Lubavitcher movement, -the largest in ultra-orthodox Judaism-, started his teachings. In truth, I already knew the answer to this question, having heard it again and again in the entirely kosher world I was born and lived in: it boomed very early in the morning, before first period, in all Lubavitchers' schools, it glared bright yellow from posters and stickers in Lubavitchers's stores, it was repeated and discussed while visiting Lubavitchers friends on Shabbos and festivals ...

So what makes a Jew "Jewish"? Very simple. A 'Jewish' Jew, -told us the Rebbe-, does two things: he respects all the Toranic and Rabbinic *mitsvot* in the *Olam Hazeah* (this world), and the Messianic *mitsvot* in the *Olam haba* (world to come).

Concerning this year's topic, -what does fulfilling the Torah in Yeshua mean for a Church Jew -, my claim is that the letter of the Torah should subsist, and the actual performance of the *mitsvot* should remain, in accordance to the orthodox Rabbinic Jewish tradition, as an *obligatory* expression of the Jewish Covenant fidelity and a *radical* commitment to the Jewish people. However, through Mashiah, this same observance should gradually develop towards becoming a sheer act of love, a holy *zikharon* (remembering) of our covenant with Hashem, no longer a condition to the Redemption of Israel but the result of this Redemption, the joy of this Redemption.

Accordingly, the *mitsvot* should be considered a gift to make it possible to live a fuller life that brings one closer to Hashem and to one's better self. As the Rebbe used to say, "the *mitsvot* are not a question of love *or* Law but a question of love *expressed in* the Law, *conceived in* the Law like a child in his mother's womb".

Consequently, the actual performing of the *mitsvot* would first of all mean acknowledging what Hashem has done for us, praising Him for his greatness, and this is what reconnects us to His *Kedusha* (Holiness), the Presence that sanctifies us. Rabbinic Judaism calls this the "*sod*" (secret), the inner hidden meaning of the *mitsvot*, which are, therefore, sacramental acts.

This is also the attitude by which orthodox women are invited to perform the mitsvot in general and the time-related mitsvot in particular, as I will show later. I feel entitled to this analogy in force of a personal conviction that there is certainly a feminine element in the way we, as disciples of Yeshua, depend on our Messiah and His sanctifying activity: do not the Prophets often link the relationship between Hashem and Israel to that of a husband and his wife¹? And does not Sha'ul-Paul not claim that the Church is the bride of Yeshua²?

In Orthodox Judaism, in fact, women will always observe almost all the *mitsvot exactly* as men do³. However, for a woman, this same performance can be “transformed” by an incoming different responsibility on the base of a very special principle, the *pirsumei nisa*, which I will specifically consider below. For example, a woman will normally be obliged by the *halakha* to recite the whole *Shema* twice a day, but if she is needed somewhere else, she can say the first verse only and the *mitsva* will be equally fulfilled: she will praise and thank Hashem in a *different but absolutely equivalent* way.

On this base, I will also argue that the fact of transposing this particular conception into a Messianic vision of Redemption will effectively “transform” the *mitsvot*, because it will make the link between observance/transgression and reward/punishment to be severed, while the joy of performing the *mitsvot* will entirely wipe out the anxiety of not being able to accomplish them for some reason or another: we would still be accomplishing a *mitsva*, but a different one, which, fulfilled by Yeshua’s presence, will reveal the most profound meaning of our relationship to Him. As we will see, this is possible because it is His very own *Kedusha* that grounds the *mitsvot* and keeps them from becoming an overwhelming experience, which might sometimes risk threatening person, home or community.

I will develop my argument from two axioms, which will allow me to brace the Rabbinic *mitsvot* tradition from a “messianic” angle:

a) the belief in Yeshua as Israel’s expected Mashiah, as the “embodiment” of the entire people of Israel and as He who is present even among the Jews who reject his claims;

b) the many Talmudic declarations⁴ that when Mashiah will come, He will bring to the entire Jewish people a new Torah, so new that it will be difficult for us to understand, and only He will be

¹ Hoshea 2:9; Isaiah 63:9; Lamentations 3:33; also, the singing of the *Shir HaShirim* on the Shabbat Eve.

² See, for example, Eph 5:22-24 : “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands » (NRSV).

³ Except, as I said, for some very special time-related *mitsvot* such as, for example, the *tefillin*, the mounting to the Torah etc...

⁴ See, for example, Midrash *Vayikra Rabbah* 13:3, interpreting Yeshayahu 51:4; Rambam, *hilkhos Mamrim* ch.1; Midrash Yalkut Chimoni § 429; JT Sanhedrin 4:2; Midrash Tehilim 12:7; Sifra on Devarim 17:18.

able to teach to us. He will reveal us the hidden core of its message, its innermost pulsing heart, its *sod*. In fact, during this time of exile we do not perceive the deepest spiritual meaning of the Torah; however, in the days of Mashiah, its divinely animated force will become manifest and the new significance of the Torah will be utterly, constantly and visibly revealed in the heart of every individual, as fr. Antoine also showed us.

I will articulate my argument by first positing what I believe being the necessary “horizon” from which the whole framework should be considered, namely; the concept of “fulfillment”. By this notion, I will show that Rabbinic tradition indeed reveals the *mitsvot's kedusha*, which is an eschatological concept referring to an eschatological reality. I will then point out the indwelling presence of Yeshua in the Rabbinic *mitsvot* tradition, and, successively, His relation to the *mitsvot's kedusha*. Finally, I will propose a possible Messianic Jewish performance of the *mitsvot* according to Rabbinic tradition, in the conviction that practical application is every bit as important as theological reflection. This last proposition will be shaped on the *haredi* women's relation to the *halakha*.

But first, I would like to start dealing with the whole question by presenting some of the main “down-to-ground” riddles about being a Messianic Jew in a Catholic environment, as I see them out of personal experience.

1. The Church-Jew's riddle

As I said, being born and bred in ultra-orthodox Judaism made that the strict practice of the *mitsvot* shaped my everyday life and I never thought it could be otherwise. However, soon after receiving Baptism and entering the Dominican Order I realized that for a Jew who had decided to live her Jewish faith in Yeshua as Mashiah within the Catholic Church things were not going to be *that* obvious.

Never, in becoming a Christian, did I intend ceasing being a Jew but, at the same time, I realized that my belief in Yeshua as Mashiah had to imply some sort of “newness”. My objective was clear but rather mind-boggling, as it implied maintaining integrity and continuity with the Jews and establishing freedom and autonomy to the Gentile community of the Dominican sisters, while simultaneously forming with them “one people out of two” and keeping true to Yeshua's message.

In other words, I wished to live Christianity the “Jewish way”, wanting to breach a boundary

without being marginalized or even excluded from a community, Israel, I fervently desire to continue to be part of.

I knew that with the coming of Yeshua the Law had never ceased to be relevant to Jews, as He never said they were not to practice the *mitsvot* any longer: all the controversies with some other Jewish leaders concerned how best to observe the Law but never about *whether* to observe it. At the same time, as I said, if He was the one He claimed to be, namely, the Mashiah, then He was bound to have brought *some sort* of change...

So, my main question was : *what difference had Yeshua brought to the mitsvot's performance ?*

This issue is far from being a mere theoretical dilemma as it means, for example, not feeling *existentially* uprooted during the "adoration" of the cross on Good Friday; or when the parish organizes a fasting day on Shabbos; or at the eventuality of receiving Holy Communion from the cup or approaching the Sacrament of Reconciliation; or when *Tish'a B'Av* falls on the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary, or *Pessah* during the Holy Week; or when I am asked to decorate the altar with flowers on Shabbat, or in eating *hamets* during *Pessah* and shrimps when invited to someone's house, or, simply, in drinking their wine; or in putting flowers on a tombstone; or in reading during a celebration ; or in writing the full name of the Eternal One ; or in finding the possibility of ritually washing my hands before every meal, or taking all the knives off the table at the *birkat hamazon* (grace after meals) or enjoying an ice-cream while strolling in the park ... and so on.

Finding a solution to these problems is a formidable challenge because it implies discovering how Yeshua wants us Jews to live His message. And this means going back thousands of years in order of finding how Yeshua inhabits Judaism in its fullness, which can only be revealed in an everyday Orthodox practice of the *mitsvot*, as I will hopefully show below. But Orthodox practice is very detailed, and it goes well beyond the injunction of keeping dairy separated from meat or of not using the car on Shabbat. It concerns many other "tiny" things like, for example, the interdiction during a meal of handing the bread directly to another person. Or, on Shabbat, to tighten a loose button by pulling its thread, or to wear a piece of jewelry that does not cling to the flesh or that we do not always keep on us... and much more.

As I said, it is neither easy nor evident to be a "Messianic Catholic Jew" and, frankly, I am still

struggling and groping my way. At present, I live in a very peculiar and out-of-the-ordinary way, with an extremely high degree of autonomy to my community and this is why I can keep the *mitsvot* and regularly go to a conservative synagogue.

However, I more than often feel an undeniable pressure from the Catholic world: "Why do you do all this? Aren't you a Christian *now*?". And I ask myself: if the Catholic Church cannot bear in her midst the presence of a Jew who believes in Yeshua while continuing to practice all the *mitsvot*, I wonder *who* is the Yeshua she is professing ... is He the same one in whose Name I have accepted to receive the Baptism?. Some others, more enlightened, tell me: "You're a bridge!": and yes, bridges are a good thing, but can one live on a bridge ? And for how long? I am often forced to choose. Every time, my roots prevail, but the price is always high.

Therefore, by this presentation, I do not have the pretention of giving any answers: rather, I will try and cast a quite simple vision by presenting some areas of discussion, in the honest desire of offering an opportunity for further development and refinement...or eventual disagreement!

2. The concept of fulfillment

Both the Jewish and the Christian traditions believe Mashiah to be the fulfillment of the Torah. Concerning this reality, the main issue is, of course, in which form and under what conditions. However, it seems to me that there is an even more fundamental problem we should necessarily consider, before delving into the heart of the question; namely, the notion of "messianic fulfillment".

The Western concept of messianic fulfillment is mainly conceived in terms of perfect accomplishment, analyzed in precise categories according to a linear logic, pointing on a line and drawing out a "prophetic timetable", neatly arranged in time and space. In this sense, such a perspective allows us to "tick off" the events as they occur according to a neat, pre-ordained schedule. Now, this mentality is completely foreign to the Hebrew mind for which what counts is "*the day or time when Mashiah acts*" and not the particular sequential order of His action: to a Jew, the important thing is only that "He *will* act". In this context, the Redemption brought forth by Mashiah sums up all that we are intended to be, but at the same time it points to the fulfillment of Israel's mission as light of the nations, elevating her history and transforming it into something utterly new.

Therefore, when dealing with the Rabbinic tradition, I suggest that we give up the idea of

the supreme totality deriving from classical Christian tradition and think in the reversed terms: *the fulfillment in Mashiah is much less achieved and complete than what it fulfills*. Everything blurs into everything else according to a “block” logic and yet, of course, it opens up on infinity.

In other words, Yeshua is not the fulfillment and cessation of Hashem’s engagement to Israel as Israel, and neither the resurrection of Yeshua is the end of the story, making everything completely saved, enlightened, sealed. Rather, Yeshua becomes the *further* realization of Hashem’s promises to Israel, which leads to the enactment of Redemption for the Jewish people and to the further extension of Revelation to the world.

In Judaism, perfection is not a goal, Mashiah is hidden in the Torah and, consequently, in the *mitsvot*, that are its practical expression. Jewish life through the *mitsvot* already provides a “foretaste” of the *Olam Haba* (the world to come). Mashiah already fulfills Redemption and yet, only a part of it is achieved as all of it simultaneously calls out for our contribution: *Revelation leads to appeals for the process of Redemption, and Redemption leads to the expectation of a fuller realization of Revelation*.

This particular notion of fulfillment clearly appears in the institution of the Shabbat and in the concept of Israel as a holy people, but also, and even more fundamentally, through a reality that is intimately associated with Israel’s life by actualizing Hashem’s redemptive realm in the present. Namely; the *kedusha* of the *mitsvot* within the Rabbinic tradition.

In fact, according to Rabbinic Judaism, the *mitsvot’s Kedusha* surfaces in two foundational characteristics:

a) The “collective memory”.

The practice of the *mitsvot* serves a memorial of four messianic elements like four concentric circles: holy people, Jerusalem, Mashiah and *eschaton*. This can be especially seen in the entire Jewish liturgy, as well as in the laws and customs linked to Jewish festivals, lifestyle and various traditions;

b) The relationship between the holy and the profane.

According to Rabbinic Judaism, the *mitsvot* point to the messianic removal of the differentiation, the realm of “all-sanctification”, as Abraham Heschel and many other scholars rightly claim. In fact, the *mitsvot* connect us to Hashem and by observing them a Jew lifts profane world to holiness, to its *kedusha*. This causes the Holy to “bend down” and encompass within Himself the whole of profane life. This is why Hassidism does not recognize anything as simply and irreparably profane: for a Hassid, “the profane” only designs the « not-yet-sanctified », the « is-to-

be-sanctified ». Therefore, everything physical is apt for sanctification, and attending a material need is an act of worship, a sacramental act, a reaching out to Hashem's *Kedusha* and a hastening the time of Redemption. Thus, by the practice of the *mitsvot*, a Jew not only partakes their eschatological reality, but he extends it to all nations as a preparation for the final Redemption when Hashem's presence will fill the entire universe. The Hasidic idea of the *avodah be-gashmiyyut* (divine worship through the use of material things) implies exactly this: the positive use of material things of this world as an act of divine worship.

So, the *mitsvot's* Rabbinic tradition is essential to our mission which is: revealing the Divine presence in the creation and bringing forth Mashiah. Furthermore, two additional elements may account to its fundamental importance:

a) We cannot escape tradition: in fact, there is not a single "Jewish" observance that is not "touched" by tradition. Jewish religious life has always been based on the establishment of a communal framework for interpreting, applying, and living out the *mitsvot*. The very existence of the Jewish people depends upon Jewish practice and Jewish rhythms of life. However, at the same time, we cannot deny that there is something that longs for accomplishment as far the ultimate meaning of Rabbinic Torah is concerned. After all, along the entire Jewish history there are plenty of examples of renewal movements who have sought to revive and reconstruct Rabbinic Judaism -the one I belong to is an example-, and yet have managed to do so while simultaneously accepting and officially being a part of that tradition. Our past Jewish history proves that it is perfectly legitimate for one to embrace tradition and yet engage it in a lively debate.

b) As Mark Kinzer points out: first, Rabbinic authority is the *halakhic* authority that Israel accepted as legitimate successor of *Moshé rabbinu* (as it is said right in the Talmud). Second, even if it had existed an early Jewish Messianic *halakha*, it has now disappeared and we cannot appeal to its living tradition any longer. Third, we could never engage ourselves in developing our own Messianic-Jewish way of life if we do not agree on a possible founding axis.

Moreover, if we keep to this particular notion of fulfillment, the Church's tradition would really appear to be as Jewish existence ushering into the Messianic era, inaugurated by the Resurrection of Yeshua and the birth of the Church. This is the era that will end with the coming of Israel to the Messiah, the second coming of the Messiah to Israel and the universal Resurrection. This is the final destiny, the eschatological consummation of Covenant history.

3. Yeshua within the Rabbinic *mitsvot* tradition

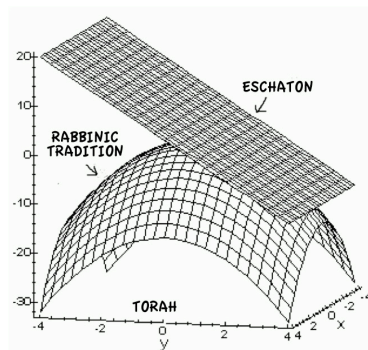
We have seen that the Rabbinic tradition can reveal the *mitsvot's kedusha* if considered within the framework of a certain conception of “fulfillment”. We have also seen how the performance of these *mitvot* signify—pointing to, but also representing and illustrating— the future Messianic Age where the barrier between holy and profane will not longer exist.

We had also taken for granted that Yeshua is Israel’s Messiah, to the point that the election of Israel does not merely anticipate the mystery of Yeshua’s incarnation, death and resurrection; rather, Yeshua’s entire life is constitutive of that election; that is, Israel’s election is an essential, constituent element of Hashem’s Redemption as presented in the *Brit Chadashah* (the NT).

Let us then try and see the relation between the Rabbinic *mitsvot* tradition and Yeshua.

For this, I would like to describe the indwelling presence of Yeshua in the Rabbinic *mitsvot* tradition by using a mathematical metaphor, suggested to me by Fr. Antoine.

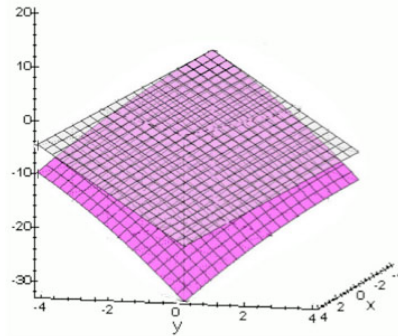
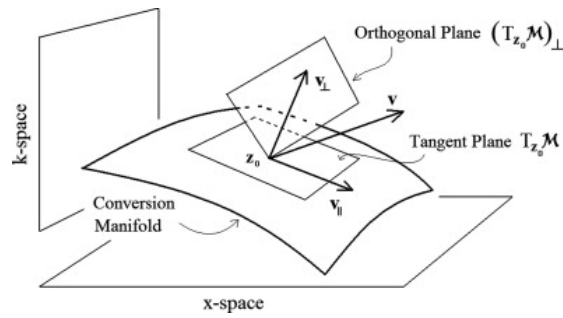
According to this specific model, Yeshua, fulfillment of the Torah (*eschaton*), could be compared to a three-dimensional vector tangent plane to a surface. The surface, representing the extension of the Rabbinic *mitsvot* tradition, is placed in a space representing the Torah.



At this point, suppose we wanted to draw a line that went from the beginning (the Torah) to the *eschaton* (Yeshua, the tangent plane): in this case, as we can see from the image, we would necessarily had to go through the Rabbinic tradition with all its kind of *iotas/mitsvot* in between (the space included between the limit of the curved surface and the base).

Now, as the Rabbinic *mitsvot* tradition develops through the interpretation of the Torah, pointing to *eschaton*, the surface will “move” in the sense that it will expand its area while reducing its curving-factor. Consequently, the tangent plane will gradually be “flattened” on it as more and more of its points will touch the surface. To infinite, this “movement” will form a unique surface: “Torah-Rabbinic tradition-*eschaton*”⁵.

⁵ By the same token, the more we « slacken » the Rabbinic interpretation of the Torah, the more the surface will reduce its surface, grow to a « point » and the tangent place, the *eschaton*, will have less and less points in common with it.



This means that we must consent to Yeshua's presence "inside" *all* the *mitsvot*, starting from the ones that concern the praising of Hashem, right up to those regarding the Shabbos interdictions of leaning on a tree, or opening an umbrella or a milk pack by tearing along the pre-cut line, or brushing one's teeth with a toothbrush.

Thus, the path the *mitsvot* follow in order to simultaneously point to the completion of Redemption in Mashiah, the *eschaton* (vector v_1), and the order inherent to the end of human time, to infinite (vector v_2), must necessarily go through an unfolding of the Rabbinic tradition contained at the source of Torah and in the past history of Israel, a divine dimension which thoroughly transforms and fulfills its human interpretation.

4. Yeshua IS the *mitsvot's kedusha*

We have now seen how Rabbinic *mitsvot* tradition actualizes the *mitsvot's kedusha* (that is, Hashem's redemptive presence) and how Yeshua is present in this entire tradition.

Let us now prove how Yeshua not only reveals the *mitsvot's kedusha*, but IS this very same *kedusha* as He fulfills the condition of "collective memory" and melts away the barrier between holy and profane⁶.

As far as the first condition is concerned, I would rather invite all those interested to vision Mark Kinzer's work "*Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the*

⁶ There are quite a number of passages in the Rabbinical literature stating the disappearance of the barrier between clean and unclean in the Messianic Age (ex. *Midrash Tehillim* on 146:7). See also fr. Antoine LEVY's presentation at the Helsinki Consultation *Tying and untying shoes, a Church-Jew approach to Torah fulfillment*, Oslo, June 21st-23rd, 2013.

Jewish People»⁷ which offers a detailed and ground-breaking presentation of Yeshua as the « one-man » Israel. In his book, the author proves how Yeshua, as Mashiah, fulfills the condition of “collective memory” as He summons up the redemptive elements contained in the *mitsvot*'s *kedusha*.

At the same time, we know that the character of Yeshua's life and mission is totally new. Through Yeshuah, history itself becomes sanctified as an element of Hashem's divine redemptive plan. Yeshua brings forth a dynamic and sanctifying presence that is crucial to the actualization of Hashem's salvation history. When Yeshua comes into contact with impure people He does not become impure but, on the contrary, it is He who transmits purity and holiness and life. His *Kedusha* invades the present world and alters it in its deepest structure. Through Him holiness finally falls into a different category because the relation between Hashem's saving power and Israel changes: Redemption is not a transition from present to future any longer but it is a bursting of the future into the present. Yeshua transforms the created order by overriding the boundary between holy and profane and by revealing a prophetic *kedusha* that will eventually lead to the sanctification of the universe, pointing to the “realization” of eschatology where future history is made sacred by history past.

Through Yeshua, it is not the *mitsvot* that lead us to holiness thus permitting fellowship with Hashem any longer, but it is the gift of His atoning sacrifice to Hashem that pulls us to both *mitsvot* and holiness, re-orienting the Scripture's hermeneutical centre as *eschaton* ceases to be the mere outcome of human history at the end of time.

5. A possible way of performing the *mitsvot* in Yeshua

As I stated at the very beginning and concerning a possible way of performing the *mitsvot* for a Church Jew, I would like to suggest an analogy with the *haredi* women's position.

In Orthodox Judaism, we now know it, the criteria guiding a woman's performance of a particular *mitsva* in the place of another one is its aspect of *pirsumei nisa* (publicizing a miracle)⁸.

In itself, the nature of this concept is subject to a fundamental debate among the commentaries, but in general it states that the prevailing *mitsva* is the one that renders most evident Hashem's presence or redemptive intervention, and this is the source of obligation to women as an integral part of their role in *hinnuck* (education). A woman is therefore called to

⁷ Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005.

⁸ *Pirsumei* means to reveal or divulge, and comes from the word *paras*, meaning spread, as in a tablecloth. (In modern Hebrew, *pirsomet* is an advertisement.) *Nisa* is Aramaic for *ness*, miracle, which also means banner.

observe all the *mitzvot* as a man would do, whenever it is possible and as stated by the Rabbinic tradition; however, in case of any kind of obstacle to this action, a woman's main objective will be choosing the *mitsva* with the "highest degree" of *pirumei nisa*, so to say, in order of best acknowledging Hashem's generosity to us, and thus revealing His hidden presence, spreading His Name all over the world and bringing forth the Mashiah.

In other words, pointing to the *pirumei nisa* of a *mitsva* means witnessing its eschatological reality, its *kedushah*. For example: a woman is obliged to the *mitsva* of *akhilat matsah* (eating of the *matsa*) during the Seder, and if she does not have enough wine for the four cups she is obliged to sell her clothes or borrow money for the sake of fulfilling this *mitsva*. However, on the base of the *pirumei nisa*, it has been decided that if any of these acts should put in danger the *shalom bait* (harmony in the home), the remembering of the miracle will suffice⁹. Similarly, there is a general interdiction to eat or drink or engaging oneself in major activities before morning prayers, but there are exceptions for a woman as she can will be allowed to eat and drink if this enables her to say her prayers with a greater concentration, or if she needs to carry out household chores or all sorts of *divrei mitsva* (activities in support of a *mitsva*) like shopping for Shabbat, exercising for health, showering etc...

As we can see, for a woman, it is not a question of *softening* or *toning down* the *mitzvot*, or, least of all, *whether* to actually perform a *mitsva* or not, but: which is the *best mitsva* to accomplish in order to:

- reveal Hashem's hidden presence in the profane dimension ;
- affirm Israel's call to be a holy people ;
- acknowledge Hashem's greatness by giving thanks and rehearsing His saving acts in history.

And does this not present an extraordinary resemblance to the issues at the base of all the numberless confrontations between Yeshua and certain Jews, as we read them in the NT ?

To conclude: for us, Church Jews (but I dare: Messianic Jews in general), performing the *mitzvot* in accordance to the principle of *pirumei nisa* would mean:

- seeking to bear witness to the reality of the redemptive encounter with the G-d of Israel, of our Fathers, through his Son, in a way that does justice to His message and to the authenticity of what we are.

- being a sign and a depository of the spirit of Hashem sent by Yeshua and of the relevance of the Torah.

⁹ Rambam, IV Hilchot Chanuka, 13 ; Shulchan Aruch 671, 672.

- making a memorial of Yeshua's love and obedience to the Father unto death. In fact, the ultimate meaning of each *mitsva* is Abraham's avinu *aqveda* which, in turn, means loving Hashem as the only One, with a love that is more than life itself.

- realizing Yeshua's promise of Israel's, - and the world's -, complete renewal: by a faithful and radical commitment to the Covenant we become a living sign of this eschatological reality. This would also respond to the Rabbinic statement: "The *mitsvot* were given only in order to purify human beings"¹⁰. That is, the entire purpose of observing the *mitsvot* is to improve ourselves, to make us better people, more caring, more loving, more concerned. In this case, the question related a *mitsva* would no longer be: « Did I perform it correctly in order to please Hashem and be saved? » but: « Am I "purified" by this observance, I am more loving of my fellow? » If so, the choice of the performance of *that* particular *mitsva* has achieved its purpose. In this sense, Rabbinic observance does not relate so much in the scrupulous observance of each detail, or in the numerical adding up of how many *mitsvot* one has observed, but in the *way* in which this observance has changed the individual.

- being "light of the Nations" : according to Rabbinic tradition, everything we do in the public sphere also has as its goal the education of the person herself and her family, and, in this sense, the *pirumei nisa* is both a public and a private declaration. In fact, the history of this concept rightly demonstrates that all public displays of Judaism have as a primary focus the education of one's own family and self¹¹.

In other words: our actual performance of a *mitsva* would become a concrete possibility of entering into a dimension of existence in which messianic fulfillment is experienced as an eschatological reality and in which our present act is the anticipation of the consummation of history in a redeemed future. The *mitsvot* will become the actualized, historical performance of Hashem's Realm on earth, and our living by the Torah according to the Rabbinic tradition will be entire Israel's thankful and joyful response to Hashem's generosity.

Thus, a *pirumei nisa mitsva* will be Israel's act of response to Hashem's covenant making engagement with her.

The *mitsvot* will then really be holy *zikaron*, meaning an act that simultaneously points backward to Hashem's Covenant faithfulness and, at the same time, forward, to the

¹⁰ Genesis Rabbah 44.

¹¹ See B'T Shabbat 21a-23b and Gemara Pesachim 112b; Kiddushim 9a-9b; Megillah 3b,18a; Berakhot 14a.

consummation of this same Covenant. As such, past, present and future are fused in the memorial itself. This is the notion of “fulfillment” we mentioned above.

Finally, concerning this particular conception, I would posit that:

- we are called to recognize two prophetic *halakhic* authorities and when the respective requirements are in conflict we *must* find a way to be true to our faith in Yeshua as Mashiah while being faithful to Israel and to her Tradition. However, if a public act of faith in Yeshua implied renunciation of the Torah and of Israel, then the *halakha* should have the priority in order of maintaining the Covenant¹²;

- there cannot be any “lesser” or “greater” degree of Torah observance : the question is *selecting the best pirsumei nisa mitsva, and not accepting some mitzvot rathen than others*. If we agree to give authority to Rabbinic tradition, we must also accept its basic statement according to which *all the mitzvot are of equal importance* and deserve our attention; it’s true that there is a distinction between *kallot* (light) and *hamurot* (heavy) *mitsvot* but this simply means that some *mitsvot* strike us as ‘lighter’ as they take less or little effort to be accomplished.

6. Conclusion

A Torah inscribed on Jewish flesh, in Yeshua, can only be actualized through Jewish flesh; that is, by Jewish actions and Jewish behavior. As we have shown, a *mitsva* is the substance of Israel’s response to Hashem.

To be sure, these Jewish actions are often liturgical acts, but they cannot be limited to liturgical reality alone. If we only proclaim Yeshua’s redemptive work liturgically and do not carry it out in our flesh then the liturgical act loses its efficacy. Hashem reveals Himself through the materiality, the physicality of food, blood, pottery, dishes, etc. and our performing the *mitsvot* make us the living connection to Yeshua’s Redemption to Israel and all the Nations. In other words, our daily practice of the *mitsvot* infused with holy meaning, through Yeshua, has a significance that will ultimately affect all creation.

However, by the same token, if we are to be active and vital agents of salvation in history embodied in Yeshua and embodying Yeshua in Jewish flesh in the present, we must not see ourselves as isolated individuals but in our intersubjectivity of relating to one another as a collective “we”: we must know what it means for each one of us, Messianic Jews, to connect with

¹² This, in the conviction that an act of faith in Yeshua that should go against Israel cannot be considered in harmony with the Church’s tradition, of course.

the G-d of Israel in Yeshua. As fr. Antoine told me once, what we really need is to “think” together how to develop our own unique voice to add to the collection of voices of our people over the generations. We must express and deepen our understanding of the reality of redemption Hashem has made known to us in Yeshua, our Messiah.

If we are here it is because we are all feeling the need of building something together and there is no way out now other than going right through the middle of it. The path is to engage rather than disengage. We must dig deeper and swim in the conversation. This is not just a theological exercise: it is our heart, our soul and our life, for all of us and for all Israel. As Rabbi Tarfon is reported to have said: ‘You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it’¹³.

And maybe, one day, we will be able to establish a “multi-confessional” Jewish community, prophetically gathering all Jews who believe in Yeshua as Mashiah, in communion *with*, but autonomous *to* its Gentile counterpart. While being perfectly conscious of the “wilderness” of this totally crazy idea, I still believe it truly feasible, one day, *be’ratson Hashem*.

¹³ *Pirkei Avot* 2:21.