

**Authority, Freedom, and Tradition**  
**in the life of Jewish Disciples of Yeshua**  
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As a Jewish Roman Catholic or a Roman Catholic Jew, I belong to two communities that treasure tradition and promote its preservation and transmission to future generations: the Jewish people and the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, despite being both Jewish and Roman Catholic, I am very conflicted about tradition – if I am to be honest I must share with you an ambiguous mix of veneration and rebellion. I am deeply religious but passionately modern and critical. I am a proud Jew, a devout Catholic religious and priest but also deeply embedded in a post-Enlightenment and secular world.

When I think of tradition, I must admit that the beautiful song from the movie “Fiddler on the Roof” immediately pops into my mind. Tevye the milkman says with great simplicity: “Without tradition, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof”. Tradition, according to Tevye, allows us to keep our balance. It provides us with our identity as it tells us who we are and what God expects of us.

Indeed, the balance and security provided by tradition are anchors in the perilous waters of a constantly changing world. Tradition means “handing down” and implies that we are embedded in a larger community, a community that has meditated on communal identity and mission over centuries. Tradition is a “deposit” that constitutes a rich heritage, one that we receive from our ancestors, one that we bequeath to our children. We are called upon to trust our ancestors, our fathers and mothers in faith, who constitute a broad community, spread across centuries in time, spread across the face of the globe in space, which has reflected on who we are and how we are to live our lives. The attitude of veneration with regard to this treasury known as tradition is remarkably similar in the Jewish and Catholic worlds.

Before continuing, I must, however, point to my own real situation. As a Jew before I came to know Yeshua, I was roundly secular. Having received a Jewish “traditional” education, I rejected the practices promoted by this education and identified myself as fully a child of an age that scorned tradition and focused on its darker sides: its patriarchal, exclusive, colonizing and tyrannical side. Coming to know Yeshua within staunchly traditional Churches, first Russian Orthodox and then Roman Catholic, I adopted the traditions of the Church – particularly the language, the liturgy, the rites, the prayers and the calendar – despite the inner voice that continued to call out against the stifling aspects of tradition. This adoption of Catholic tradition eventually led to a deeper appreciation of the Jewish traditions I had never really practiced. As a Catholic, I began to delve into traditional Jewish language, the mystery of Shabbat, fasting on Yom Kippur, paying more attention to the Jewish holidays. This was not only an attempt to hang onto a Jewish identity which connected me with my family, my neighbors and my people, but also the realization that the Jewish trajectory of tradition had something valuable to say about understanding the Living Word of God in the world and particularly in the world that I lived in in Israel.

Unfortunately, the two communities I belong to, Jewish and Catholic, have only too seldom recognized how much they have in common. They have only too often developed their traditions in a manner that was a direct denial of the tradition of the other. Jewish people and Church wrestled, each one trying to exclude the other from those who are authentic transmitters of the tradition of Israel. My own community, Jewish Catholics, had to not only give up Jewish traditions on entering the Church, but in some periods were cruelly persecuted and lived under a shadow of deep suspicion with regard to supposed traditional Jewish practices that survived their baptism. I regard it as a special grace-filled privilege to live in a time when these two communities, Jews and Catholic Church, are in a dialogue that underlines not only where the two communities have parted ways but also where the two communities share common concerns. A particularly fruitful part of this dialogue concerns tradition – how Jews and how Catholics have transmitted their understanding of the Living Word of God from generation to generation. It is with great gratitude that I recognize that the extent of exchange between Jews and Catholics in the age in which I live has never had an equal since the first generation of the Church.

However, not all is peace and harmony. I do not live as a traditional Jew and sometimes venture beyond the realms of the traditions of Catholicism. I confess to a rebellious spirit. This rebellion is fueled by suspicion with regard to tradition particularly when it comes to the attitudes transmitted from generation to generation towards the religious other. Christian traditional discourse about Jews evolved into a massive “teaching of contempt” that the Church is working hard to overcome after the disastrous fruits of this teaching became evident in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Traditional Jewish discourse about Christians (and non-Jews in general) is typically contemptuous and is becoming more and more problematic where Jews constitute the overwhelming, dominant and powerful majority, in the State of Israel. Of course, this suspicion is not limited to the religious other but is typically extended to many other kinds of “others” too – whoever does not conform to the human model at the center of the traditional system of thought.

The rebellious side of my nature when it comes to tradition, both Jewish and Catholic, is also fueled by a meditation on the New Testament. Tradition in the ancient languages does not only mean to “hand down” – the faithful transmission of the treasury from generation to generation - but can also mean to “hand over” – a betrayal of the ever fresh reception of the Living Word of God. In the New Testament, the word “*paradosis*” (tradition) is used thirteen times and only three times does it refer to a positive process of “handing down” (1Cor 11:2, 2Th2:15. 3:6). Of the remaining ten times, eight of the uses of the word appear in the polemical text (cf. Mk 7 and Mt 15) in which Jesus criticizes the Pharisees: “You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition” (Mk 7:8, cf. Mt 15:3). Furthermore, the verb “*paradidomi*” (hand down) is typically used to describe the act of Judas Iscariot, who handed Jesus over. Tradition is not only the meaningful and ongoing process of understanding the Word of God in the world and deriving a way of life consonant with that Word, it can also be a process of stifling the Living Word and betraying it. It is here that modern, critical minds have to find ways of dealing with tradition so that there is indeed a meaningful handing down and not a treacherous handing over.

Our deep psycho-social need for meaningful systems of identity, practice and balance can, and sometimes do, suffocate the freedom that we are endowed with in Yeshua. My need to define myself as Jewish or as Catholic is human and sociologically and psychologically understandable.

It is here that meaningful involvement in a community that transmits a living tradition from generation to generation must be balanced by a vital critical spirit that safeguards freedom to follow in radical discipleship. Identity and balance, community and tradition are precious providing they do not hamper the constant going forth, “from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house” that is essential to the identity and mission of the disciple.

Ultimately, tradition is important but it cannot be the supreme authority in following Yeshua. The ultimate authority must be the Living Word of a Living God. This Word is not unmediated as some fundamentalists seem to believe. It does not simply drop out of heaven. Rather, this Word is always mediated in tradition and institution as it comes to us right where we are, in our humanity, in our flesh and blood, in our material world. This Word must retain its primacy and cannot be submerged in tradition and institution so that its creativity and generosity are deadened. This is the delicate path that needs to be tread – between tradition and freedom, never losing sight of the one who is ultimately the authoritative Lord and Master.

The authority of tradition is often founded on the power of the elite that has formulated it. The battles of interpretation and the concomitant formulation of tradition of both Hazal and the Church Fathers were based both on authentic insights and on the polemical definition of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. A Jewish disciple of Yeshua cannot forget that one of the catastrophic consequences of these processes was the complete demolition of the Jewish-Christian option in the world of a traditional wall between Rabbinic Jews and Orthodox Christians.

Tradition, predominantly Catholic, defines my day to day life. Yet my Jewish identity does not allow me to be uncritical and unreflective with regard to where tradition “hands over” and betrays the Living Word. Tradition, predominantly Jewish, defines the world in which I live. Observing from the margins, as a non-traditional Jew, I cannot fail to see the weaknesses and blind spots of that tradition. In conclusion then, as a Jewish Catholic disciple of Yeshua, I rejoice to live in an age where I can reflect deeply on the tradition of Judaism and the tradition of the Church and find those often hidden areas where they concord and merge into a symphony that accompanies the life of radical discipleship, walking in the footsteps of Yeshua.