

## **Fulfilling the Torah** Living Torah in the Church

David M. Neuhaus SJ

### - Personal background:

When I came to faith in Yeshu'a, I was a strongly identified and well formed secular Jew, already living in Israel. A child of German Jewish parents who had fled the Nazis, Jewish identity was an integral part of who we were. However this Jewish identity was solidly based upon the historical experience of the Jewish people, with particular reference to the Shoah and the State of Israel. In the Jewish school in which I was educated in South Africa, religious practice was marginal and Jewish identity was transmitted through a deep awareness of Jewish culture and history. Making *aliyah* to Israel as an adolescent this continued to be the way I identified as a Jew.

When, at the age of 15, I became a believer, first frequenting the Russian Orthodox, then the Greek Catholic and finally the Roman Catholic Church, and finally baptized as a Roman Catholic at the age of 26 in Israel, I saw myself as identified in the Jewish community with secular (*hiloni*) Jews – meaning in the Israeli context those who do not keep the *mitsvot*. I have remained a non-observing (in rabbinical terms) Jewish believer in Yeshu'a who is convinced that the Torah is an integral part of God's plan for Israel and the nations. How can this be a coherent position: not obeying the *mitsvot* and yet recognizing the “continuing validity of Torah even as it is fulfilled in Christ”?

As a Yeshu'a believing Jew, my conception of Torah observance begins at the Set Table (*shulhan arukh*), which for me as a Catholic priest is the altar on which I celebrate mass every day. It is here that my behavior is governed strictly by *mitsvot* – *aseh* and *al ta'aseh* (do and do not do). This is the central *halakhik* reality of my day to day life: the table upon which I institute and distribute the daily bread to my community and therefore the table at which my thinking about Torah observance must begin. It is here that the Torah and the *mitsvot* begin to have meaning for me as a Jewish Catholic. In attempting to formulate “the meaning and concrete implications” of the bond that binds me to the Torah of Israel as a Jew, I cannot make abstraction of this absolutely concrete context.

### - Torah observance at the Table

In the history of the first *kehilla*, the question of Torah observance was also linked to the Table. In the earliest account of the Council of Jerusalem, as related in Shaul's Letter to the Galatians, the separation of Jews from Gentiles at the table is roundly condemned. Needless to say, we understand today that this condemnation was related to the mixed Jewish-Gentile *kehillot* that have their origin in the *kehilla* of Antioch. It is out of this context that emerged an ecclesiology of the union of Jews and Gentiles in the one Body that feeds on the One Bread and drinks from the One Cup, which is powerfully summed up in Shaul's Epistle to the Ephesians:

*11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision"-- a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands-- 12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without*

*God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father (Ephesians 2:11-18).*

Luke's later rewriting of the Council in Acts 15 introduces an element not present in Shaul's earlier description. Yaacov *HaTsadik* asks the Gentiles to observe some minimal respect for Israel's Torah: "to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:20). The disappearance from Christian practice of the dietary recommendations in Yaacov's foundational *pesika* testifies to the sad disappearance of Jewish or mixed Jewish-Gentile *kehillot*, happily renascent in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Shaul and Luke are writing for Gentiles who, through their faith in Yeshu'a, are brought into the commonwealth of Israel. But what about the Yeshua believing Jews who are called to welcome these Gentiles into the commonwealth? What role do "the Torah with its commandments and ordinances" have? For Gentiles, these are abolished as by faith they have been brought near without passing through the observance of the Torah. Even though, Jews too are kept near by faith, their observance of the Torah is not necessarily abolished even if the realization that justification is by faith necessarily relativizes the Torah.

For Jews who are Torah observant when they encounter Yeshua, the continuation of Torah observance is undoubtedly coherent and logical. Their lives would have been defined by a practice that does not contradict discipleship of Yeshua but rather harmonizes with it, remembering that Yeshua himself as well as his early Jewish disciples were Torah observant Jews. However, the contemporary multiplicity of forms of Torah observance (ultra-Orthodox, modern Orthodox, Conservative and Reform) on the one hand, and the wide spread non-Torah observance of most Jews today raises questions about what Torah observance means in the Jewish world today. This question can not be ignored among Yeshua believing Jews as well. Furthermore, the monopoly that Rabbinic Jews have exercised since the first half of the first millennium of the Christian era in formulating what *halakha* (the way the *mitsvot* are observed in practice) is, a monopoly that led to schism in the ancient Jewish world (eg. the Karaites) and many more schisms in the age of modernity, further adds to the difficulty of defining what Torah observance is for practicing Jews who do not believe in Yeshu'a let alone for those who do.

Starting to reflect on this I am drawn to try and define what I mean when I "acknowledge the special bond that unites us with Israel's Torah." Affirming that "God's gifts and call to Israel" (Rom 11:29) are irrevocable and listening to Yeshua as he says: "Think not that I have come to destroy the Torah, or the prophets: I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17), I am called to formulate a vision for myself and those Jews in my community that promotes a Torah observance coherent with our lives as Jewish disciples of Yeshua, integrated within the universal Church and not necessarily bound by Rabbinic strategies. This Torah observance will

undoubtedly differ from the way the concept of Torah observance has developed in the Jewish communities that recognize the authority of *Hazal*, the Jewish rabbinic Sages.

The starting point for my reflection on Torah observance is our own *Shulkhan Arukh*, the table set at the center of the life of the *kehilla*. On this table, we as *kehilla* receive the Body and Blood of our Jewish Messiah and become his Body in the world. Around this table gather Jews and Gentiles, transfigured in their shared communion becoming one *kehilla*. In this *kehilla* no wall of commandments and ordinances can be re-erected between Jewish and Gentile believers in Yeshu'a. However, today we are called to realize that the disappearance of a visible presence of Jews in the Body of Mashiah has led to a disappearance of the sensitivity to Torah that characterized the first *kehilla* described in the Acts of the Apostles. I would say that we need the renewal of the “symphony” of Yaacov *HaTsadik*.

At the Council of Jerusalem, in Acts 15, Yaacov, the Torah observant leader of the elders in the *kehilla* of Jerusalem, listens to Shimon (Cepha) on the foundational inclusion of the Gentiles in Caesarea and then points out how what Shimon has shared creates a “symphony” with the prophecies in Scripture, citing Amos. The verb in Acts 15:15 is generally translated: “this agrees with” – a prosaic expression which hides the masterful use of the verb in Greek “sumfwnou/sin” – “symphonizes”. This symphony, a magnificent harmony between the world and the Word, between the event and the history of salvation, leads to a practical and pastorally sensitive *pesika* (ruling) that can promote harmony between Jews and Gentiles in the one body. The Gentiles are enjoined to observe a sensitivity to Jewish practice – sensitivity to the Jews in the community, sensitivity to the Jewishness of the *Mashiah*, sensitivity to the Jewish Scriptures that provide the very language for speaking the experience of meeting the *Mashiah* and sensitivity to the Torah. The thrice repeated *pesika* in Acts is surely more important than a simple diplomatic and passing compromise and might reveal something essentially important for Jewish believers in Yeshua whose primary insertion in the Body of *Mashiah* is in mixed Jewish-Gentile *kehillot*.

For me then, continued Jewish observance of the Torah is intimately linked to a fidelity to the language of Torah, seeking the symphony of Word and world, Torah and life, Israel and Church. The discipline involved commits the Jew to keep alive a language of Torah that is not so much Rabbinically halakhic but more epistemologically foundational. Whereas, Gentiles might be naturally drawn away from the language of Torah and its rendering of the embodied experience of God and his *Mashiah*, the Jew in the Body of *Mashiah* is committed to the language and grammar of the Torah that makes God and his *Mashiah* understandable. Jews in the Body have a special vocation to raise the question of Torah and its *mitsvot* in every generation. The ongoing attachment to Torah is translated into the constant raising of the ongoing validity of the Torah: what about circumcision (bodies marked for God), what about *Shabbat* (bodies oriented to God) and *kashrut* (bodies cultivated for God). Torah is language that is ongoing in its relevance for relationship with God... To speak Torah language is the vocation of Jews in the Church in the face of the millennial tendency of a Gentile Church towards philosophical speculation that is in danger of detaching God from incarnation and encounter.