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On Sabbath Candles and everyday hospitality: some reflections around one of the most female mitzvots

My presentation would start with some observations concerning the ethos of our common work. It was a pleasant experience of working with person of the same vision of two most important conditions of cooperation, i.e. the subject of discussion and the form of it. First, from the beginning we could easily agree that for avoiding idle talks and abstract speculations two women can reflect only on the subject related not only to the sphere of their academic interest, but to their inner personal experience and quests. The second thing that we have decided from the beginning was the essential question of how we will work without suppressing each other. Being rather individual in our ways of doing things, we decided to write our papers separately, from time to time asking each other: How are you?, just to be sure that co-author still exists, and then exchange the texts. I'm telling about it not only for thanking Lisa for her tolerance, kindness and patience, but for giving the additional explanations of the general composition of the whole work.

Lisa has given detailed and multisided theological elaboration of the relations between woman and God as they are seen in Torah as well as implications that come from the Messianic perspective, while I would like to supplement it with some more concrete consideration developing issues proposed by Lisa and, again having for me not only academic, but personal significance as well.

As usually I would start with literary quotation:

*"Shloymele's mother Sarah was frail and slight, with small, with white hands, crisscrossed with tiny purple veins, and the pale face and thin lips of a pious women. She seemed to be pure spirit, to float rather than walk. She was a learned woman, who knew all kinds of prayers [tkhines), prayers of the land of Israel and prayers of Sarah Bas Tovim; she was well-versed in the laws of khala, menstruation, and candle lighting, which are the particular province of women, and she read such books as Tsena Urena, The Shining Candelabrum and the like. It was she who showed the women how to pray: what hymns to say, to say, when to rise, when to stand on tip-toe in the kedllsha prayer. In the women's gallery of the synagogue, she kept a lemon and other pungent remedies to revive herself or the other women whenever they felt faint. And in fact it was hardly possible to keep from fainting when Sarah read. She would read with great emotion, her melody melting the soul and pulling at the heart strings, When she wept, everyone wept with her; her tears would have melted a stone"*¹

Mendele Mokher Sforim gives a little ironic, but almost ideal picture of women's observance of Torah that traditionally based on the prescriptions of separating of *hallah*, ritual purification and lighting the Sabbath candles altogether with making Yom Kippur candles that isn't mentioned in this paragraph. In my culture this image of piety has almost completely disappeared with the generation born before or soon after the Great War. For those who was born later it remained as a part of the secret *bobe maises*, a complicated archetype and symbol consisting of the remembrance of their Jewishness, of rejecting of it altogether with rites as back views, and of dream hidden so deeply that they couldn't dare to confess it even for themselves. (There are some sociological and ethnographic researches proving this fact).

My own mother also was frail and slight. She also was a learned woman. She was well-versed in the laws of Marxist political economy and Lenin's writings, in poetry and music, in struggling for frozen chicken in

¹ Mendele Mokher Sforim, *Of Bygone Days*, pp.300-301.

the long queues. My grandmother was the same frail and slight learned woman who knew all kinds of Yiddish, Polish and Soviet songs, laws of writing verses for family feasts, as well as laws of *hallah*, alchemy of *gefilte fish*, how to meet Sabbath and make home from nothing. She has passed me a knowledge of making *hallah*, *gefilte fish* and Sabbath table properly, however she is helpless to change my reality where Friday or even Saturday are working days, and the Liturgy is celebrated on Sundays in the community that is hardly imaginable for her. Here the number of questions arise, determining my approach for the issues proposed for the discussion. I would even sharpen the initial questions of Antione: *what significance do obtain Torah mitzvots for a certain "Church Jew", who has no practical possibility to perform them and the same time belongs to the Church community with elaborated system of its own traditions of the mixed, i.e. biblical and ethnographic nature? Is it possible to find the way of following Torah remaining faithful both to the Jewish roots and to the Church you are belonging to and responsible for? If the answer is positive, how the significance of mitzvots or even one particular mitzvah can be rediscovered in this context? Is it possible having no possibility to perform mitzvots in the traditionally established forms to live by their meaning and to rediscover their meaning in reference to the variety of life situations that are not mentioned in Torah?*

On my mind, the relevance of putting such questions is justified by the very logic of Matthew 5-7, presenting Jesus approach to Torah. Using philological terms it can be described as a disclosure or "rolling out" of meanings, when the initial meaning is neither denied or neglected, but being in focus of reflection reveals new dimensions and shows its implications for the contexts which weren't taken into consideration previously. This feature of these chapters was in the last decades carefully analyzed by many researchers, while here I would like to refer to the remark of Russian biblical scholar Sergey Averintsev. In the comments to his translation of Mt he, particularly writes: "The Greek verb *pleromai* means both to fulfill or complete, and to supply or make up for. The second meaning having significant Aramaic parallels is of special importance showing that Jesus as Messiah reveals the completeness of the meanings of the initial revelation"². Following Jesus as living Torah implies, besides all, the reflection on acceptance of his way of dealing with meanings of the traditional prescriptions that makes, on my mind, such questions as well as approach to mitzvots possible.

For dealing with these questions I would like first to think on one of three most "women's commandments", i.e. lighting of the Sabbath candles, the second to trace the link of this mitzvah and commandments of hospitality and then to propose some practical implications.

1. Lighting the candle

Blu Grinberg in her very practical introduction to the Jewish way of living stresses the protective functions of Sabbath candle lighting. Chava Weissler in the article on the traditional piety of Ashkenazic women based on the analysis of *tkhines* collections and the similar devotional books, states: "Tkhines for lighting the Sabbath candles shows how women understood their religious activity – they included prayers for protection of candelabrum in the Ancient temple Thus showing some meanings the kindling lights can hold"³ Further, in the same work she gives *tkhine* from the collection *Seyder Thkines u-Varkhoshes* that points to one more important meaning of this mitzvah:

² S. Averintsev, p.202.

³ Weissler, p.246.

"Lord of the world, may my mitzvah of kindling the lights be accepted like the mitzvah of the high priest who kindled the lights in the dear Temple. "Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path" [Ps 119:105; quoted in Hebrew]. That means, your words are a light to my feet. May the feet of my children walk on God's path. and may the mitzvah of my candle lighting be acceptable, so that my children's eyes may be enlightened in the dear Torah. I also pray over the candles that the dear God may accept my mitzvah of the lights as if my candles were the olive oil lamps which burned in the temple and were never extinguished"⁴.

Here in fact one can observe the same priestly meanings described by Lisa in the context of Numbers. The woman doesn't only identify herself with high priest, thus emphasizing the "strong sense of the importance of the her religious feelings", but acts as a priests, interceding for her children, asking to enlight them with the light of Torah (the constant idiom of many "male" prayers is used here) and through the last comparison of the candles and olives lamps in the temple symbolically indentifies her mitzvah with oil offering for the temple and keeping the sanctity of it.

However if we would address to *Tolaat Jakov* by Meir ben Gabai, written in 1507, particularly to the Chapter called *The Mystery of Sabbath*, one more meaning of lighting the candles can be found. In the Section 8 we read:

This is incumbent for all women... According to the path of truth, souls which [are called] cosmic Candles, issue from the Tabernacle of Peace and Rest on those people who are worthy on them. Sabbath night (Shekhinah) distributes the additional soul for each of them, for these souls are her candles. To symbolize this mystery the responsibility of lighting the Sabbath candles devolves upon women. This (mitzvah) affords her a great privilege for through it she will merit holy sons shining lights of Torah and piety who will promote peace. Moreover, she thereby grants her husband length of days. She must light two wicks to represent both "Remember" and "Keep" (The Mystery of Sabbath, 8).

We wouldn't discuss now the practical benefits of this mitzvah, present almost in all texts concerning it. What is more interesting is an idea of an "additional soul". The lighting of candles not only multiplies souls, but unites them both with "Holy Guest...the Supernatural Holy One"⁵, with each other and with whole people of Israel thus welcoming them to participate in the common joy of Sabbath. The presence of this motif of unification and welcoming as a significant part of the Sabbath liturgy can be proved at least triply, although many more confirmations could be brought. The first, by the gesture of embracing the Sabbath candle flame that accompanies the saying of the initial blessing: "Barukh hu uvarukh shmo" ("Blessed He and blessed His Name). Bella Shagal in her "The Burning lights" compares this gesture with the mystical "enchasing" of the heart in the frame of Torah. However in the religious folklore and Ashkenazic folk piety this gesture is tightly associated also with the symbolic gathering of all family, including those who are dispersed all over the world, in the heart of praying woman and welcoming them to the Sabbath celebration: "...every Friday, lighting the candle, I'm thinking about each of my daughters imagining their faces... They are also thinking on us, kindling their lights"⁶. The second confirmation is given in midrash "Sabbath in Heaven" included by Louis Ginzberg in his "Legends of Jews". It depicts Sabbath celebration as a huge gathering of all angels – "the angel of the water, the angel of the rivers, the angel of the mountains, the angel of the hills... the angel of the deserts, the angel of the sun, the angel of the moon, the angel of the herbs... the angel of reptiles... the angel of domestic

⁴ Weissler. 256.

⁵ Quote in Ginzberg, Sabbath Soul, 253 (?)

⁶ Grinberg, 54

animals⁷” etc. coming to share the common joy of praising the Lord. While the third confirmation can be discovered in two liturgical texts, following the lighting of candles and creating a kind of compositional bridge between it and Kidush. These are *Lekha Dodi* welcoming the beloved “bride Sabbath” and “Sholom Aleichem” inviting angels of peace to come in peace and bless people. This chain of welcomings, encircling heaven and earth, people, angels and the High Guest reveals one more meaning of Sabbath, in a very distinctive manner summed up by Abraham J. Heschel: *“There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord”*⁸. Thus lighting of the Sabbath candles signifies the beginning of the very special time of welcoming and sharing.

Hospitality as a mitzvah and challenge

This idea of welcoming allows to suggest the certain link between the “female commandment” of lighting the Sabbath candles and more general mitzvah of hospitality. The further considerations will be based not only on classical works by Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, but mainly on the theology of hospitality developed by the Oxford scholars David Smith and Barbara Carwell in their book “A Gift of the Stranger”.

In Torah the commandment of hospitality is directly given six times. In the most laconic, almost abstract form it is found in Ex.22, 20 and repeated in 23, 9:

*You shalln’t wrong a stranger (‘ger’) or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*⁹ (Ex 22,20)

You shalln’t to oppress the stranger for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourself been a stranger in the land of Egypt (Ex 23, 9)

The concretization comes in Leviticus, 19,33-34:

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shalln’t wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord and your God.

Almost the same formulation is in Deuteronomy, 10, 19:

You must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

As Bernard M. Levinson, the author of the comments to the translation of Deuteronomy in JSB mentions, befriend here literary means concrete expression of love in action and service¹⁰.

In the Ch. 24 of the same book this command appears in the most developed form. Stranger, the “other” is identified here not only with the belonging to the alien land, but with the most vulnerable members of the ancient society – orphans and widows.

You shalln’t subvert the rights of the stranger or fatherless, you shalln’t seize widow’s garment. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God has redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment.

⁷ Ginzberg, 83.

⁸ Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, p.???

⁹ Here and further all Bible quotes are given according to JSB, Oxford, 1999.

¹⁰ JSB, p.421.

Commentators propose to read “shalln’t subvert” as a concretization of “shalln’t judge unfairly” and to see here only a prescription of the full juridical protection of the stranger, but the general context of this commandment points to the wider sphere of its implications.

And in the Ch. 27, in the summarized list of the rejected actions, the same commandment comes in the most expressive form among the twelve curses: *“Cursed be who subverts the rights of the stranger, the fatherless and the widow”* (v.19)

In whatever book of Torah we would find this commandment, any time it appears in the same and very specific textual surrounding -- among the prescriptions describing not only minimal ethical norms, but the acts, going beyond the proper behavior, having clear religious meaning and signifying righteousness as a hallmark of the belonging to God’s chosen nation. At least twice, in Exodus, 22, and in Deuteronomy, 27 it comes immediately after the prohibition of idolatry, thus becoming one of the most important signs of fidelity of people to God, the expression of the uniqueness of its vocation. Saying it, I’d like to emphasize that in Torah commandment of hospitality isn’t a minor cultural prescription, but it is considered the essential component of “walking before God and being righteous” altogether with obedience to the laws of purity, of Sabbath, of kosher etc. The same vision is developed in Jesus teaching: “according to Mt 25, extending hospitality to the stranger is a matter of life and death – eternal life or eternal death”¹¹

What is also striking in these commandments is that they explain the imperative of hospitality neither by the pragmatic or moral qualities of the “guests”, nor by virtues of His people and even not by the benefit or dangers following from the neglect of it, as we can see in many other prescriptions, but in the people’s memory about their own experience of being stranger and gratitude for being liberated (*Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God has redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment*). In this logic a denial to remember means a denial to observe, because the only reason for performing this strange mitzvah, obliging to welcome not only “own people” but anyone who comes is the thankful memory. Keeping and remembering here are coming together the same way as they are indivisibly united in symbolism of two Sabbath candles, as Meir ben Gabai points.

Traditionally the ideal image of hospitality is found in Genesis 18, 1-15, telling about angels visiting Abraham on their way to Sodom. For our purpose I would propose to read this text in correlation with its midrash interpretations, represented by one of the haggadic midrashes included by Louis Ginzberg into the “Legend of Jews” mentioned above. Biblical text says *“The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre”* when he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot”. Haggadic midrash adds rather significant detail: Abraham was sitting not only due to the hot weather, but he was waiting for the guests. *“... absence of strangers caused Abraham great vexation”* because *“he considered the duty of hospitality more important than the duty of receiving the Chekhinah”*¹². This way, Abraham appears before the reader not only as a man of faith, but as a man of hospitality: these characteristics seem to be absolutely synonymous in the Torah context. Another midrash, mentioned by James Kugel in his “Traditions of the Bible” says that, Abraham intentionally *“pitched his tent at the crossroads of the oak of Mamre... and welcomed every one rich and poor, kings and rulers, the crippled and the helpless, friends and enemies... he could have pitched his tent anywhere. If he decided to do so at*

¹¹ Smith, Carwell, p.84

¹² Ginzberg, pp. 241-242

what was apparently a well-known spot in (or just outside) Hebron (see Gen. 23:17, 19, etc.), he must have done so because he wanted to welcome strangers...¹³

God has listened Abraham, and having mercy on him, sent him three angels. They, midrash says, “had assumed the form of human beings to fulfil his wish for guests toward whom to exercise hospitality”¹⁴. Abraham promising them “a morsel of bread”, performed much -- “*a royal banquet, exceeding Solomon's at the time of his most splendid magnificence... himself ran unto the herd, to fetch cattle for meal, and... bade Sarah bake the bread*”. The rest of the story is very similar to the biblical one. “*After the meal the angels asked after Sarah... Michael, the greatest of the angels, thereupon announced the birth of Isaac*”, Sarah laugh within herself “*Is it possible that these bowels can yet bring forth a child, these shrivelled breasts give suck? And though I should be able to bear, yet is not my lord Abraham old?*”, while Almighty said unto Abraham: “*Am I too old to do wonders?*”¹⁵. There is a lot of immensely interesting details in this midrash, but generally stressing the exceptional value of hospitality it is a story of the male ways performing of it, typical for the ancient Middle Eastern culture., The role of Sarah is limited by her making bread in strict accordance with the propositions Abraham has given to her and her laughter normally considered as a sign of her mistrust. The question arises: how does this story touch the issue of women’s commandments and their significance for the Jewish disciples of Jesus? I would guess that if not the answer, but some hints can be found in the visual representations of this story. Among the huge variety of the visual images of it, I would suggest to concentrate on the famous picture of Mark Shagal and less famous Byzantine iconographic versions. PICTURES WILL BE PROVIDED Shagal’s interpretation is very close to the biblical and midrashic one. Sarah here is just an assistant of Abraham, her role in this drama of hospitality is limited by passing him the bread she has baked for he could share it with guests. The Byzantine art proposes quite a different vision. The Greek icon of XIV century depicts Sarah serving guests together with Abraham, the same image of hospitality we found on the Novgorod icon of XVth century, while on a preserved piece of XIIth fresco century from St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev Sarah is depicted staying in the corner and listening.

These three dimensions – practical care, readiness to welcome “others” who are challenging our world and listening them, constitute that image of hospitality in which, on my mind, the meaning of mitzvah of lighting the Sabbath candle can be realized.

Practical care, “a way of Martha”, or diaconic hospitality as David Smith calls it is essential. A story from tractate *Bereshit Raba* (JT) tells of Rabbi Josi’s wife who was considered by his surrounding unworthy just because she rejected to share her meal with the disciples of Rabbi coming to visit him. “Sons, be generous to strangers and you will be given exactly what was given to the great Abraham, the father of fathers, and to our father Isaac, his son”, Testament of Jacob says (7:22), while 1 Clement directly links the saving of Lot from Sodom with his hospitality and piety. However the practical care itself isn’t enough. From some volunteering experience I know quite well that satisfying the physical needs of the “other” doesn’t mean welcoming him or her into our “tent” or real sharing of our meal and our time with him, accepting guest as a God’s messenger who came with challenging news. Too often we prefer to leave them outside the fence, or more or less forcibly assimilate to our traditions.

On my mind, the meaning of hospitality as mitzvah is revealed more clearly in the idea of *xenophilic* hospitality proposed by the same scholar. I think this concept perfectly reflects the very essence of hospitality as welcoming and accepting others in the totality of their otherness, sometimes unbearable,

¹³ Kugel, 311.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 243-244.

and giving this otherness place in our life, following Abraham who gave the space in his tent for his incredible visitors and Jesus, giving the space in his life for harlots and tax-collectors. “The stranger not only has to be fed or given drink, his or her voice also has to be granted space. His discomfort had to be met with concern, her stories have to be heard and responded to. The fact that those stories can be new and different enriches, rather than threatens host’s task”¹⁶. Xenophilic hospitality supposes that the host humiliates himself becoming not only “an attendant and a servant [to the visiting angels]”¹⁷, but a disciple of the guest, as Lisa rightly mentioned referring to Mary sitting “sitting at Yeshua’s feet”, like his male disciples did. However this is a discipleship of a special kind. It doesn’t depend on the novelty or brightness of the information the guest brings; it is very difficult discipleship of facing the inevitably new experience of the other and being tested by it. To listen means to be vulnerable and to agree to be wounded, to be put under the question, to realize own insufficiency that can be supplemented only by the invitation of one more soul challenging the host again and again with the same questions: “Who are you? Where do you live?” It is very easy to elude from them or to hide oneself behind the abstract, including theological speculations or even behind good deeds, but before Abraham started his cooking activity he met with guests face to face.

One more feature of this hospitality I would describe as “creative openness” as opposed both to suspiciousness and curiosity. Sarah laughed listening the news that she, ninety-one year old woman would born a child. James Kugel, based on the number of sources, suggests that she could laugh not from disbelief, but with the pleasure from listening that wonder will happen to her. After many centuries her laughter and questions will echo with the surprising questioning of the Mother of God: “But how can this come about if I’m a virgin?” (Lk 1, 35). Both, Sarah and Mary have heard some incredible almost mocking news from their guests, and in each case their courage to accept in joyful surprise something that is above all human reasoning and considerations has made miracle a part of human history. Strangers always come with strange news ; all other depends on how these news will be received – denied as a danger or welcomed as maybe hardly understandable, but real option to participate in the overcoming of the sinful divisions in the world.

Here we come back to the basic question of this paper, i.e the possibility to live the meaning of mitzvah beyond the forms prescribed traditionally. I would suggest that welcoming the stranger, allowing him to remain himself and trying to understand both his way and the own way reflected in the mirror of the “visitor”, embraces the otherness the same as women embraces well-known and every time new flame of the Sabbath thus uniting with many “others” in her thoughts and prayers. Through every act of embracing strangers and strangeness we light the Sabbath candle thus inviting the High Guest to come and stay with us. In this sense I would even dare to think that xenophilic hospitality would be a good metaphor of the position of the “Church Jews” in their communities.

What does it mean practically?

I would like to share three ideas ts.

- A. Welcoming my Jewish fellows to the reality of my Christian life, listening to their objections, suspicions, stereotypes, doing my best to understand them, recognizing historical and psychological justification of their view, participating in different forms of Jewish education and academic life (seminars, conferences, schools) and trying, not so much by theological talks, but mainly by the authenticity and freedom of own Christian living witness that we are, remaining Jews, “ have found our Jewish Messiah”.

¹⁶ Smyth, Carwell, pp. 91-92..

¹⁷ Philo, Questions and Answers in Genesis 4:10

- B. Welcoming my Church fellows into the Jewish tradition, sharing with them the beauty of it and again listening their objections, suspicions etc., together reflecting on the Jewish roots of the Scriptural texts, trying to initiate more or less the serious theological talk that would destroy the foundations of Church stereotypes. I wouldn't like to dramatize, but in the present situation of the growing anti-Semitic tendencies in the Church and public discourse such talks can be rather risky, but hospitality always presupposes risk, otherwise it wouldn't be hospitality at all. The same time, there are still many possibilities to speak about Jewish-Christian issues in the frames of the academic initiatives. One of the examples is the academic project "Israel-Church" initiated this year by the group of Jewish and Christian researchers. It will include public lectures and panel discussions, academic conferences (one of them I hope will be devoted to the blessed memory of Cardinal Lustiger), translations and publishing the recent and the most significant researches on Jewish sources of Christian tradition.
- C. Welcoming to and in my Church community all desolated, rejected, neglected, unworthy from the common piety point of view, including people with non-traditional orientations (this is a serious challenge for our Church and society now), and "non-canonic" biographies, supporting those who are persecuted due to the political reasons or represented as enemies of public wellbeing. Not because they are always right or I always share their acts and positions, but because we "were strangers in the land of Egypt" and were given the light of the Sabbath joy to light it in the darkness and to share with others.