

What Do We Need to Obey? Thinking on the Tradition from inside the Post-Traditionalist Culture

In the contemporary culture tradition is treated quite often as something opposite to freedom. This position is expressed, for instance by one of the most influent “left” philosophers Slavoi Žižek. Nevertheless Yeshua disciples, in whatever culture they would live, are called to the “freedom... as the children of God” (Rom 8:12). This calling, given to all his fold, obtains a special significance for Jewish disciples because their history as God’s chosen people started from the challenge of freedom. The following remarks present an attempt to reflect on the following question: how this seemingly evident contradiction between tradition and freedom can be eliminated in the life of Jewish disciples of Yeshua? As far as I’m not a theologian, I would like to start with two examples from the Jewish literature of XXth century. The first is the “A Simple Story” by the Nobel Laureate Shmuel Yosef Agon, the second is “Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust” by Jaffa Eliach.

The main character of Agnon’s novel, a young man Hirsh is a real victim of the family and societal tradition, forbidding him, a son of the noble citizen of the Galician *shtetl* Shibush, to marry his poor remote relative Bluma, whom he loves, and instead forcing him to take to wife a daughter of another rich and noble person. An attempt to understand the divine meaning of this tradition, represented by his surrounding as a “law” sanctified by the forefathers (“Is it a duty to God to marry those we don’t love?”, he asks) and to accept it, while struggling with his true feeling, brings him to the mental decease. At last he recovers. While his recovering seemingly is directly connected with his reconciliation with the societal tradition that is understood both by him and others as a loyalty to God’s will, the pain he feels listening “the sad and tender music” of the blind violinist, who appears in the final scene, tells that all isn’t well. As Hilel Halkin puts it, “the tender music fascinates Hirsh, the same time reminding him that the essential part of his life is lost forever”ⁱ, is sacrificed to the tradition.

The stories, included into Jaffa Eliach’s book, on the contrary, prove that faithfulness to the tradition can be a source of inner freedom and dignity of the God’s image in totally humanless conditions. Faith and faithfulness “become an optimistic link, providing the structural continuity between past and future, while endowing the wretchedness of the present with dignity”ⁱⁱ A woman Bronia in Bergen-Belzen denied herself food giving a piece of camp bread and a potato to Mr. Rappaport who taught her children Jewish law and tradition. “I learned a Jewish tradition in my father’s home. Now it is my duty as a Jewish mother to teach it to my children”ⁱⁱⁱ, she explains her act, absolutely irrational in the camp conditions. A group of the exhausted Hasids were brought at the eve of Yom Kippur to clean the room of the camp officer and denied to eat the proposed meal although the officer has commanded to eat and the meal was absolutely incredible for the hungry prisoners. A group of Hungarian Jews from the Labor Batallion decided to keep Yom Kippur fasting although the work was extremely hard and they were told by the German commander that those who fast will be executed. In the evening the commander knowing about their fasting said that he is too generous to kill them, but as a punishment they are commanded to climb the mount which was near to their place and slide down on

their stomachs. Those who would like to repent, saying publicly that “they were wrong in fasting, will be released”. “Not a single hand went up”, a storyteller said. It is significant that their faithfulness to the tradition became a witness of the special calling of the nation even to their enemies: “At midnight the punishment was stopped. The men were given food and drink. They lit small campfires, trying to dry their clothes and warm their bodies. Their faces shone with a strange glow as they sat around the small campfires... A young German officer... walked over to the group and said: “I didn’t know who will win this war, but one thing I’m sure of – people like you, nation like you will never be defeated, never!” (“Who will win the war”)^{iv}.

These pieces represent two polar approaches to the tradition: tradition as an oppression, a form of violence and slavery, and tradition as a highest form of freedom and a way to it. The first attitude, quite popular in the modernistic and especially postmodern culture, requires some clarifications. In the case presented by Agnon’s novel, the Jewish tradition as well as the relations with it are misunderstood in the principal sense. The observing of the tradition is taken, first of all, pragmatically, as a way of obtaining certain benefits and sustaining the well-being (Gedalia, a father-in-law of the main character, “observes rigorously God’s laws” just because “he was constantly afraid to lose his acquired property”^v), and as such it interlaces with the pragmatism of the everyday life and acts. Thus, being deprived of its initial meaning of faithfulness, the religious tradition can’t preserve its sacred character even more, while the societal habits and customs determining everyday life are sacralized, and, as it always happens with the false sacred, become a cause of the sorrows.

The second attitude is quite clear at least inside the Jewish spirituality. “By obeying the *mitzvot*, Daniel C. Matt writes, Israel affirms that God redeemed them from the slavery of Egypt and transformed them into servants of the divine will. “I brought you up from the land of Egypt on condition that you accept upon yourself a yoke of the *mizvot*. Whoever acknowledges this yoke, acknowledges Exodus. Whoever denies this yoke, denies Exodus (*Sifra* on Lev. 11:45)”^{vi}. It is true, the observing of *mizvot* can give an enormous freedom, and I have discovered it by the own experience. When I can to observe Sabbath or at least light a candle in a proper time, I feel that on this day I become free from my everyday duties, a lack of time, useless talks, Facebook. This is an active, creative freedom given to deepen my relations with God and people. However the old question, initiated already in the time of the early Church, still comes again. To what extend do we, Jewish disciples of Yeshua, need to observe all those detailed *mitzvot*, including not only moral and religious prescriptions, but, for instance, a prohibition against wearing garments made of both wool and flake, the red heifer etc.? Myriam considers that all of them have to be observed as a way to glorify God. My position is quite different. Due to the shortage of time I would limit myself just by one remark. No doubts, the *mitzvot*, as Midrash Raba on Genesis says, “were given solely to refine humanity” (44:1), but the outer forms of them quite often are determined historically and culturally. As Sergey Averintsev used to say, “God speaks about Divine things using human language”^{vii}. The numerous literature of *responsot*, devoted to the observing of *mitzvot* in the most extraordinary situations (thus, the famous *Responsot Miteom* by Rebbe Krasilshchikov explains how to keep Torah prescriptions in the conditions of ghetto and concentration

camp) proves that the essence of Torah, i.e. faithfulness to God and love to the neighbor, can be expressed in the variety of ways. Torah helps the nation to be holy, however every epoch requires its own forms of holiness as a separation for God.

Two poles of the attitude to the tradition are quite evident, both of them can be discussed from the different points of view, but the most interesting things, on my mind, are laying between them.

Most of humanity is actually living neither in the total denial of the tradition, nor in the absolute observance of it, but in the situation of the clash of the traditions. Our family traditions are clashing sometimes with the traditions of the school, institutions and other social structures, the societal traditions are clashing with the traditions of Church that is natural for the secular societies. There are also inner clashes in the traditions of the traditional Churches themselves, beginning from the sadly known Church schism of 1054 up to the continuous and endless battles between liberals and fundamentalists and contradictions between the local and ethnic traditions of the Byzantine Orthodoxy with the Tradition of the seven Ecumenical Councils, Apostolic Decrees and Church Fathers, a clash “between Tradition and traditions», as Rev. George Florovsky said. At last, there are a lot of contradictions between historically, and sometimes politically shaped Church traditions and biblical tradition, the tradition of Torah. For making the picture more realistic, it ought to be specified that all these clashes are happened in the broader context of culture described by many scholars as post-traditional, putting under the question all existing traditions formed previously and the value of them. As Hannah Arendt has pointed in “The Sources of Totalitarianism” (the same thought was discussed also in the theology of Shoah), the catastrophes of the XXth century have shown how easily traditions, for centuries nourishing and sustaining societies, giving the feeling of identity and not only social, horizontal, but mystical belonging, became a source of totalitarisms of all possible kinds. No wonder, that Joseph Brodsky called a private person “a main figure of the contemporary culture”. The same thought was expressed by the Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, who emphasized that it is only private person, wholly realizing the uniqueness of his or her personhood, can stay in true relations with God. “We can meet with God only as we are, in the truth of our personal being”, he used to say. I totally agree with both. However one sunny day this private person, overfilled with his privacy and ready to protect it, comes to the church, that isn't a Sunday gathering of private persons only, but both a Body, a sort of commonality created and united by the *hesed*, and the same time in the historical dimension it is a structure. This structure has its own traditions – theological, liturgical, behavioral, even linguistic, both biblical and ethnical, and sometimes, as it happens on the Russian version of the Byzantine Orthodoxy, more ethnical and political than biblical. The situation becomes even more complicated for those personalities, who sooner or later discover their Jewishness with all Jewish heritage including not only family photos, grandmother's songs and cooking, a couple of Yiddish phrases and a feeling of strangeness, but a highly developed religious tradition, in many points contradicting with the traditions of their Church and neglected by it. A set of the inevitable questions arises:

What in this case the Jewish disciples of Yeshua have to obey?

Whose supreme authority have they to recognize?

Do they need to follow the different ethnical traditions, even if they are presented as a part of the Church culture?

In what was in this case our “freedom... as the children of God” is realized?

For looking for the possible answers I would like to apply a method used by Cardinal John Henry Newman in his famous Letter to the Duke of Norfolk. As all know this letter was written in 1875 as a response to Lord Gladstone, who publicly accused Catholics in the blind loyalty to the Pope and in the placing both personal and civil freedoms and duties “at the mercy of another...claiming to an Absolute and entire Obedience”^{viii}. Newman builds his response as a certain hierarchy. The basic value for him is conscience as St. Thomas Aquinas has understood it (“a practical judgment or dictate of reason by which we judge, what hic et nunc has to be done as being good, or to be avoided as evil”^{ix}), the second place is given to the Pope as a head of the Church, and then the loyalty to the State and queen comes. “. . . If I’m obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts, -- he concludes the Letter, -- I shall drink..., if you please, still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards”^x.

Such principle of hierarchy could be appropriate in our case too. I will not speak about conscience, it is very secret thing, however, if I identify myself not as a Russian Orthodox of Jewish origins, but a Jewish disciple of Yeshua, I mean that my supreme authority will be a tradition of Torah, and not a patriarch of Moscow. I will gladly and sincerely follow the tradition of my Church in the part that realizes *hesed* as a foundational Church principle, and willn’t obey it when it says or does something contradicting Torah. For instance, I will obey if it demands from me to give a part of my salary for charity projects, but willn’t obey it when it openly or hiddenly supports the military annexation of the part of another country, just because I was told: “You can not covet your neighbor’s house” (Ex.20, 17). One can ask, whether you would set yourself apart from the Church this way? Well, the answer will depend on the understanding of the frames, or the borders of the Church. If they are limited by the frames of my local Church or even by the frames of my denomination, I definitely separate myself totally according to the first understanding of frames and partly according to the second, but still belong to the Church founded by Him, Who came “not to abolish the Law and Prophets, but to complete them” (Mt 5:17). It is clear also that by my denial to obey certain ethnical, canonical or political claims, I become a stranger in my own Church. It isn’t a most comfortable feeling, of course, but it in some sense proves, that I’m keeping my faithfulness not only to my Jewishness, but to “my Jewish Messiah” who came in this world as a stranger even for his own nation and for his people: “He came to his own domain, and his own people didn’t accept Him” (Jn 1:14).

Here the additional question arises: what if such understanding of the tradition and authority comes to contradiction with *hesed* not only as a basic principle of the Church, but as a prescribed by Torah attitude to all living creatures, including humans and

donkeys? St. Mary of Paris, Mother Maria (Skobtsova), one of the saints who realized *hesed* as a way of living in the Church, reminds that at the Last Judgment we willn't be asked about our religious duties, our piety, but the only thing we will be actually asked about is our relations with others. I think dealing with such contradiction is also a question of the discernment between cultural traditions and revelatory truths. If the unconditional love to my neighbor causes me to wear scarf in the Church as a part of the tradition of the culture I'm living in, I will do it because it will be also a fulfillment of Torah prescription, although in the different cultural form. Or, if the neighbor would be ill and would need my help on Saturday, I will come, otherwise I willn't observe Sabbath because a peace and joy of it will not be complete. However if the same neighbor will insist on my support, for instance, of the military speech of Patriarch, it is the same love pouring to the world from Torah will encourage me to deny. You can love truly only if you are staying in truth yourself.

Of course this is the a draft that has to be further discussed, reconsidered and elaborated, but I think , such discernment based on the principle of the "conscious obedience to the tradition" as it would be described, can give me as a Jewish disciple of Yeshua a needed freedom in my very traditional Church.

And finally I'd like to ask the last question. Do we as the Jewish disciples of Yeshua of different denominations gathered together, have our own tradition (s) as a Church of Israel? Do we need them at all? Theological and ecclesiastical notion of the "Church of Israel" is quite disputable, it was discussed for the decades, but following Anna Shmaina, I would suggest that at least one tradition we have. It was founded on Golgotha by Yeshua himself, when he has entrusted his Mother to his disciple and his disciple to his mother. This moment through the interrelation of three Jews the first, pre-Pentecostal Church of Israel was born, a Church with only one tradition – to be a seed of faithfulness to Torah and *hesed* to all who are forgotten, persecuted, neglected, to each other and to all world asking for mercy, pouring out from the Innocent Sufferer, our Jewish Messiah.

ⁱ Гилель Галкин. К роману Шмуэла Йозефа Агнона «Простая история». In: Шмуэл Йозеф Агнон. Простая история. М., 2004, p.369.

ⁱⁱ Jaffa Eliahu, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*. Vintage Books, NY, p.6.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 123.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p.105.

^v Агнон, p.146.

^{vi} Daniel G.Matt. *The Mystic and the Mizwot. On Jewish Spirituality. From the Bible to the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green. NY, 1986, p.398.

^{vii} See, for example, Сергей Аверинцев. *Слово Божье и слово человеческое*. In: Сергей Аверинцев. *София-Логос*, Киев, 2001.

^{viii} John Henry Newman, *A Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, www.newmanreader.org/Works/anglicans/volume2/gladstone/index.html.

^{ix} *Ibidem*.

^x *Ibid.*