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Jewish Continuity in the Church; some reflections on the three-fold call

In one of his preparatory letters to Anna Shmaina-Velikanova Fr. Antoine wrote that he would like to see at the encounter “really believing Jews that is able not only to come with “theological fables”, but approach seriously to our common issues. What does it mean to approach seriously, each culture understands in its own way, the same as what does it mean to do theology our denominational traditions understand differently, and this evident fact of our differences, I think, has to be taken into account when we dare to judge about the seriousness of our positions.

Following Zigmunt Baumann and those both Christian and Jewish post-Holocaust intellectuals who insisted on the ultimate seriousness of the personal story (or witness) in comparison with the abstract theoretical speculation whatever persuasive it would be I would base on the vision of seriousness as a inseparable link of two kinds of responsibilities, i.e. academic responsibility for the quality and honesty of the reasoning and that very special kind of the existential responsibility that is born inside the personal witness and realized by it.

So, my short and very preliminary reflections on what does it mean, on my mind, to be a Jewish disciples of Yeshua in the more broad context of the affiliation to Am Israel I would start with a personal story. Some years after I was baptized one of my colleagues from the Institute of Humanities where I was teaching that time, an old Jew, a true Son of Low, a faithful follower of Lubavich rabbai has asked me: “Tell me, why on earth did you need it?”. I have given him my personal reasons and add then that if before my Jewishness was for me a kind of sad necessity – some are blind, some are deaf , while some are Jews – now, coming to the Church, I could appreciate a meaning and a value of it, and realize myself a part of Jewish nation, Am Israel. He was listening attentively and then responded: “Well, Almighty knows many ways...” We never came back to this issue again, but his question has inspired me to think about in the broader context: personally -- why did I, a person grown up in the typical Jewish and not typically Soviet family with at least one real *tsadek* (who my grandfather was) really need to come to the Christian church to find out my direct kinship with Jewish nation and generally what encourages Russian Jews of different ages, cultures and social positions come the Church, accepting Jesus as Messiah and how does it influence both our Jewishness and Christianity?

I don't pretend here to give any sufficient answer to these questions, the only thing I'd like to do is starting from some more common observations come back to personal reflections on what it could mean to be a Jewish part of the “Jesus movement”?

I think the variety of answers is determined and the same time determines to a large extent the attitude to the own Jewishness and the place in the Christian community as well as to the Christianity itself. Speaking here about Jewish people I mean first of all Russian Jews milieu of the XXth century, although I can guess that the similar processes happen in all traditional Christian and post-Christian cultures. Of course, the first and historically evident reason is safety. I think we can generally speak here about the safety of two kinds. First is physical survival, encouraging Jewish people to ask for baptism as form of social protection during persecutions. As it follows from the memoirs of and about those clergy who helped Jews during WWII, in the beginning most of them rejected any spiritual involvement, but later some consciously came to Christ motivated by the witness (sometimes wordless) of the Christians they have met or by the entering into that depth of tragedy where not only historical, but metaphysical sense of it, “a real tragedy of Israel”, as Semen Frank in his article “The Confession of Jewish Christian” (1928) puts it, has revealed. Although it has to be mentioned that at least the history of the persecutions of the XXth century has shown, there were also those who came to baptism not for to avoid tragedy, but to share it with the whole nation, as Edith Stein, realized the prophetic vocation of the offering for the people or Paris martyr Ilya Fondaminsky who asked for baptism only in the concentration camp.

The second kind is psychological safety of being assimilated into the “major” nation, or culture. of becoming “ours”, when speaking the words of Semen Frank (see http://imwerden.de/pdf/vtoraya_navigaciya_05_2005.pdf) “baptismal certificate” becomes a state document, covering all the sufferings of the Israel nation and guarantees the perspective of success” that, Frank argues, brings to the double moral destruction. On the one hand, pragmatically baptized Jews mainly aren’t really converted, but simply non-believing people, betrayed their religious and national faithfulness for earthly wellbeing, while on the another, instead of being “a living sprout of the religious renewal of Jewish nation” they try to separate from it as soon as possible. No doubts, it is true first of all for the situation of the dominating or “state” churches, but what encouraged Russian Jews to become Christians in the atheistic or religiously neutral situation?

Of course, such witnesses of Jewish authenticity and continuity in the Christian church like Fr. Alexander Men’ or Jewish preachers in the Russian Pentecostal (or Messianic) churches were and are rather influential, but as the authors of the one of the recent sociological researches of the subject consider, quite often it goes about the finding out the identity. Having no Jewish upbringing and self-conscience, many of the “Soviet and post-Soviet Jews” in search of the

religious and cultural identity of their own come to the Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant churches, just to be a part of the inclusive or welcoming community, thus accepting first of all religious culture, i.e. rites, customs, behavior, etc, and only then – Word itself. It is significant, that associating themselves with their new religious identity, they, especially those coming to the Orthodox church, spectacularly distance from their Jewishness, often using the words “where there is neither Greek or Jew...” (Col 3:11) to justify this distance and to deny that spiritual demands that our “Jewishness-inside-the-Church”, even being neglected, nevertheless places on us. It is necessary to mention also, that such model of Christianity, crossing or denouncing Jewish identity is implicitly supported even by sound and open-minded Orthodox people. Thus, for instance, in the last and not so bad Russian movie “A Priest” (“*Pop*”), telling about the Orthodox church before and during WWII, the voluntarily baptism of one of the central figures, a Jewish girl Eva is interpreted as a positive radical break with her Jewish heritage that brings her a new life not only in the metaphorical, but in the direct sense of the word – her family is killed altogether with all the inhabitants of the *shtetl*, representing “Jewish world”, while she survived being accepted by the priest who long before the war has baptized her, and becomes a mother of a new family (“a new Eve”), totally forgetting her Jewish parents.

Is there a point where entering the Christian Church, doesn't presuppose the denial of one's Jewishness? I would suggest that it isn't always formalized theologically, but existentially clear experience of the radical personal encounter with One Almighty, making any rite, cultural custom, even the tradition of the local Church secondary to the revelation of the Word. Understanding that the following point definitely requires much more detailed elaboration, I would say here it is in the attitude to the Word one of the principal differences between Am Israel and historical Church can be seen. If for historical Church, at least from Constantine's times, Word of Scriptures becomes the source of *knowledge about* God, shaping doctrine, custom, ethics etc., for the community of Covenant, “consecrated nation” (*goi kadosh*, Ex 19:4-6), it is a “space” of relations with Him, shaping both the wholeness of history and every human life. Using Martin Buber's metaphor, “in the translation of this Divine Word into the language of the everyday reality” the uniqueness of Am Israel's call is realized. I would emphasize in this call the three essential aspects, determining, on my mind, the exceptional nature of Jewish nature inside the Church, i.e. call to listen, to call to remember and call to “otherness”.

1. Call to listen, or the imperative of “*Shma*”. It is evident that Scriptural understanding of listening is far from being passive acceptance of the commands of supreme deity of nation. The relations between God and people he has chosen are based on constant dialog. In this sense

the commandment of *Shma* is invitation to accept life as a dialogue. As Rabbai Shneur Zalman from Lyady said, “every moment God calls to human being: Where are you you in this world?” Therefore it goes about creative mutual relations of the attentive, loving listening and responding unreservedly: “Here I’m, send me” (Is 6:3). Moreover, faithfulness to the imperative of listening as a condition of being a part of Am Israel means to respond to any call whatever unexpected it can sound, remembering that the most decisive calls in the history of Israel sometimes were sounding strange enough. This dilemma between human expectations (including religious one) and unexpectedness of God’s acts towards His people, most vividly shaping the content of the Book of Prophet Jonah, can be traced also in almost all “covenant stories” beginning from Abraham and up to Annunciation. Therefore, Am Israel is called to that “open-minded listening” that implies a readiness to put under the question all our knowledge *about* God in order respond Him. This response is described as obedience: direct correlation between listening and obedience can be proved also linguistically. Thus, for instance in almost all Slavic languages the words “listening” and “obeying” are of the same root **slush* (*slushat’-poslushanie*), the same also in German *hören – Gehorsamkeit* etc. To be righteous means to obey, however not in the perverted sense of blind acceptance of any “pious” rules or restrictions, quite often used to excuse or justify most shameful things both in private behavior and Church history. It goes about the same creative, responsible work of discerning God’s call and personally responding to it.

Thus the very being in the Church reveals its true nature of a risky adventure of the exodus to the unknown but certainly promised land rather than a safe place where a believer can stay in spiritual comfort enjoying spiritual pleasures in some strange sense connected with such "unpleasant thing" that Cross is. During the centuries the Church tradition I belong to, especially in the Russian cultural context, has developed the countless forms and ways of what Father Alexander Schmemmann has called "the sacred living" ("*sviashchennyj byt*"). It creates a serious temptation to loose eschatological dimension of the Church and to see it as only "our own" home constituted by our own customs and rites, sustaining the feeling of being protected "from this world" althgether with "others" inhabiting it. For Jewish disciples of Jesus entering the Church tradition of culture they are living in, it creates the additional challenge. I would describe it as a challenge of not only cultural, but spiritual assimilation. If we don’t consider those cases when people do it voluntarily with the non-realistic and doubted, although clearly expressed intention “to escape in the Church from own Jewishness”, the question arises: can we totally “dissolve” in the national Churches, or, being a part of them as Eucharistical community, we are called to remain in spiritual sense “wonderers and strangers”, thus reminding and witnessing about the true position and vocation of the Church in this world? As one of the possible answers, speaking

from inside the Church still attached to the custom and safety more than to the Word I would propose the following thesis: Jewish identity inside the Church can be realized by readiness to live in the constant tension between staying at home, i.e. participating in the Church tradition, at least at those forms that don't contradict our mind and conscience, and constant questioning of it through the revelation of Word, pointing to a true home. In other words, the natural state of the Am Israel inside the Church as I would see it is a life both in constant Exodus from Egypt of the well-established religious well-being and in living in the reality of Kingdom that is already among us.

2. *Call to remember.* It is striking, although evident, that wide variety of the commandments from observing Sabbath (Deut 5:15) to prescribing hospitality to the stranger (Ex 23:9-12) or protection of the widows, poor and needy (Deut 24:14-22) are introduced or confirmed in the Old Testament by the formula: “you shall remember that you was the slave in Egypt” or “seeing you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex 23:9). So, it goes neither about the moral virtues of the nation, encouraging them to be faithful, merciful and hospitable, not about the “natural right” of those who are weak or persecuted to be protected, but about the very special kind of memory – a memory of own suffering and deliberation that has to shape life and every act of Am Israel. Many Jewish theologians of Shoah, for instance Emile Fakenheim in his famous essay “614th Commandment” wrote that the man task of those who survive in Holocaust and of the ancestors of survivors is to live and proclaim life. Life, as we know from the course of history, can be proclaimed differently, and in many cases proclaiming life for ourselves means in fact to proclaim death for others. The compassioning memory of own suffering reveals very important and distinct aspects of “614th commandment”. Those who know pain, have no right to cause it to others, the same as those who we cursed, have no right to curse. Accordingly, they are obliged to proclaim life not at the cost of others, but by giving others a space in their relations, spirituality and ministry. The same as the context of *Shma* gives new understanding of obedience as a creative response to the Word and Presence, call to the compassionate memory could correct the vision of one more misused biblical concept, i.e. humility. In such perspective it can be understood positively – as non-conditional embracing of all suffering, decisive denial “of persecuted to be persecutors” (Nelly Sachs) and the same time decisive agreement to accept own principal “otherness” marking Am Israel as witness not only of slavery but also of the liberation from it.

3. *Call to otherness.* It brings us to the third and final point. I have found it in the reflections of the intimate bond between Jewish and Christian communities written in the

beginning of 40th by Paris nun of Russian origins Mother Maria (Skobtsova), arrested in 1943 for the protecting Paris Jews against Nazis and died in Ravensbrück concentration camp.

Following Mother Maria, I would name it “a call for otherness, up to outcastness”.

Already in the emigration, writing about the new conditions the Orthodox church in exile has faced, she stated that the principal weakness of the New Testament Church that gradually was revealing in history and brought finally to its present disability to stop the on-coming disaster is its “abnormal and unnatural union”¹ with state. Therefore, it has betrayed its true destiny, and transformed into the personless monumental structure having no ability to witness about anything more than its loyalty to the worldly kingdoms. Now its destiny, Mother Maria continues, is signified by the fate of people of Israel, revealing in the persecutions “a living face of the... persecuted, abused, disdained, humiliated Christ ...”. In the post-Christian context Churches are facing the different challenges, but I think, when it goes about the Jewish witness for Christian community, it has to be nearly the same, i.e.

- a witness of Golgotha as the only place where in the figure of the innocent victim the fullness of Divinity and fullness of humanity are revealed;
- a witness of person and personal relations – for those who would like to see Church as personless institution;
- a witness of radical “otherness” supposed by the very fact of being elected – for those who would like to see a church as a part of earthly kingdom.

In this sense Am Israel challenges the Church not only by the Word, but also reminding it a hard paradox of its vocation. I think in our days this paradox becomes more striking and evident only in the context of Shoah. If Church witnesses glory of Resurrection, Am Israel by its very fate reminds that the way to the Resurrection leads through Golgotha where God, using the metaphor from famous “Midrash for our times” by Eliezer Berkovits is crying together with four murdered Jews, anonymous victims – young girl, sister, mother and man. New creation, “Midrash” says, will come, “God will smile again”, only when the cry of those four, symbolizing victims, will be consoled. Who has to console? Morally speaking, only those who know about the reality of new creation, who already live in it. And here the peculiar role of Jewish disciples of Messiah, Am Israel in the Church, comes to light. It is their task to console that cry by giving it the space in the liturgy, prayer and theology, by being a voice of voiceless, by proclaiming life developing new understanding of holiness, i.e. holiness of innocent victim witnessing the humanity of God and sanctity of every human being. How and in what liturgical,

¹ Мать Мария (Скобцова). Размышления о судьбах Европы и Азии, р.494.

poetical etc. forms it will be, as well as will it be possible inside the local Churches or can be the liturgical peculiarity of Church of Israel etc. only time will show, but that is quite clear, on my mind, it will be a voice proclaiming life from the very depth of human suffering shared by God. Memory of own sufferings and alienation prescribing Am Israel the universal compassion the same time forbids not only oppression towards others but any kind of triumphalism, whatever political or religious it could be. Moreover, it demands sharing the fate of the most vulnerable, to remain “the other” to all not only secular, but also Church institutions, thus reminding that Church isn’t a “structure”, but a “stranger”, called to the “great path”, the only place where eschatological encounter, recognizing each other in persecuted God is possible. I would suggest that on this way of listening, remembering and principal otherness to any worldly religious “implications” Jewish disciples of Yeshua would find their true identity in the Universal Church and finding it would truly meet with others inside the Church and outside of it.