

Faith in daily action – the meaning of Jewish religious praxis

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I would like to open this presentation with a famous quote from Blessed John Paul II's address at the great synagogue in Rome in 1986

"The Jewish religion is not extrinsic to us, but in a certain way is intrinsic to our own religion. With Judaism therefore we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers."

That statement and the many dramatic gestures of Pope John Paul II many of which have been repeated by his successor Pope Benedict XVI, testify to the remarkable revolution in Catholic-Jewish relations ushered in by the Second Vatican Council some fifty years ago.

But my main reason for emphasising this, is so that my following comments are not misunderstood or heard out of the above context.

Martin Buber said that what unites Jews and Christians is "a book and a hope - and that is no small thing." But as it has been noted, it is precisely that which unites Jews and Christians that divides them.

This is not only because we read our shared Scripture differently in light of our own religious affirmations; and not only that the precise character of the hope we share is in dispute between us; but that because of these differences, we use similar language and terms, but often mean very different things. The word Messiah, is one of those obvious examples, where we use a term common to our shared patrimony, but mean things profoundly different, due to our respective religious traditions and belief systems.

It appears to me that the word "faith" is another such example.

For Christians, as Pope Benedict XVI has declared, the concept is inextricably bound up with the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, it is born out of a perception that the human individual has to be saved – perhaps from his own very nature; but that it is essential for human salvation to be linked in some manner to an event of mysterious power that delivers the human person from otherwise inevitable tragic consequences. Of course I am fully aware that the degree of this emphasis differs within various Christian denominations; but surely this perception is central to Christian faith itself.

For Judaism, the concept of *t'shuvah*, inadequately translated as repentance, but more correctly as "returning to God", means that the human person is seen as created with the capacity for constant religious ethical rehabilitation and rejuvenation; and therefore is never completely condemned and never in need of any intercession or vicarious act of deliverance. Thus this latter meaning or significance of the term "faith" as widely used in Christianity, does not feature in the Jewish lexicon or mind set.

The Hebrew words *emunah* and *bitachon* correspond to the English “confidence” and the original Latin source of the word faith, *fidem*, the accusative of *fidēs*, meaning trust (similar to the Greek verb πιστεύω (*pisteuo*), meaning “to trust, to have confidence, to be reliable.”)

Of course I fully realize that these meanings are no less integral and relevant to Christianity itself. However any student of Christianity let alone a Christian believer, will acknowledge that there is more to Christian faith than just these meanings.

But for the Jewish mind and for Jewish understanding of Scripture, these concepts simply relate to practical experience. It is one’s experience of another’s trustworthiness, that leads one to place one’s trust in another; and thus it is in relation to God.

Indeed as the 11th century Jewish philosopher Yehudah Halevi points out; not for nothing does the Decalogue begin with the words:-

“I am the Lord your God who brought you out from the Land of Egypt from the house of bondage.”

Not only does it not say “You shall believe in Me”; but it identifies God as the Force behind the Israelite experience of liberation from slavery. In other words God is there in your historic and daily experience – His presence should be as obvious to you as the air you breathe. It should be experienced in the daily gift of life itself; but especially evident in those major events that demonstrate the triumph of good over evil. Such experience gives one the confidence and trust, i.e. faith, in Divine goodness, in the Divine Presence.

Halevi reiterates the traditional Jewish conviction that it is the collective experience of the people at Sinai that is the ultimate confirmation and manifestation of the Divine Covenant with Israel. But the Pentateuch and the Prophets affirm that God’s fidelity to Israel is constantly manifest; and it was the faith in that fidelity that sustained the people in adversity.

Yet it required a deeper understanding of God’s ways to make religious sense out of a tragic history.

The Babylonian Talmud, the repository of Jewish interpretation of Scripture and the oral Tradition over the centuries until its redaction around the fifth century of the common era (the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud was redacted a century or two earlier), contains a fascinating passage in this regard, in tractate Yoma, folio 69 b.

The text asks why the religious leadership body of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, (established after the period of the prophets and as the precursor of the Sanhedrin) was known as the ‘Men of the Great Assembly’? It explains that this was as tribute to them:-

“because they returned the crown (of God’s glory) to its original state.

Moses had come and said (describing God): He is God, Great, Mighty, and Awesome (Deut.10:17).

Then Jeremiah came and said: Aliens are destroying His Temple! Where then, are His awesome deeds? He did not say ‘Awesome’ (in Chapter 32:17, Jeremiah describes God as ‘The Lord who is great and mighty...’). Then

Daniel came and said: ‘Aliens are enslaving his children! Where are his mighty deeds? He did not say ‘Mighty’. (In chapter 9:4, Daniel describes God as : ‘O Lord, The Great and Awesome God, (who keeps the Covenant and Loving kindness for those who love Him and who keep His commandments.)

(But then the ‘Men of the Great Assembly’,) they came and said: ‘On the contrary! Therein lie His Mighty deeds; that He suppresses His wrath and tolerates the wicked. Therein lie his Awesome acts. For but for the awe of him, how could one people continue among the nations?’ ”

Thus the ancient Jewish sages saw precisely in the Jewish people's capacity to survive tragedy, the manifestation of God's faithfulness and fidelity to His promise.

Ironically there were those who pointed to Jewish homelessness and suffering over the majority of the last two millennia as proof of God's rejection of Israel and even of the latter's replacement.

But for us, our very capacity to remain alive and vibrant despite that homelessness; the very capacity to withstand the hostility, hatred and violence, that was directed at us; could only be explained in terms of God's love and faithfulness, that would lead to the fulfilment of His promise expressed in Scripture, that he would return us to the Land and bring about the revivification of Jewish life within it.

However more even than this hope, it was our daily experience that revealed to us the Divine Presence and His Goodness and sustained our faith accordingly.

The last passage of the midrash (the homiletical teachings based on Scripture) on the Pentateuch, contains the following statement :-

"He who rises in the morning and does not say the blessing (praising God as) Creator of Light; or who lies down in the evening without saying the blessing (praising God as the One) who causes dusk to fall; (is as one who) has forfeited his life."

In order to understand this statement, we need to understand the concept of a "blessing" in Judaism.

The sages of the Talmud teach that if one does not make a blessing before partaking of food, drink, scent etc., one is like a thief; because one has partaken of God's gifts without acknowledging Him.

Accordingly in Jewish practice there is a formula that one is obliged to recite before partaking of any sustenance. For example, if one is about to eat a piece of fruit, one declares

"Blessed are you O God our Lord, Sovereign of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the tree."

What is one doing when one consciously makes such a declaration?

One is not only expressing one's thanks for the pleasure and benefit one is about to derive from that piece of fruit. One is also acknowledging that it is a product of life's sustaining force; that it comes from the Creator of All. In other words one is expressing awareness and appreciation.

Accordingly, what our sages are declaring in the aforementioned midrash is that if one can get up in the morning and see sunrise, or even just daylight; or go to bed at night after seeing sunset, or just nightfall itself; and there is no awareness or appreciation; one takes it all for granted; one is oblivious to the Divine Presence in the Creation around one; then you may as well not be here - because such a person is not really living, but just functioning. To really live, means to live in the consciousness of the Divine Spirit, within oneself, one's neighbour, within the cosmos, the creation as a whole.

In effect, Judaism is a way of life that seeks to maintain God-consciousness in our lives as much as possible; not only in inter-personal relations, but in all aspects of our daily existence; and not only in acts that are specific to such a goal, e.g. prayer three times a day (and blessings before and after food); but also in relation to fundamental physical needs such as eating and drinking. The discipline of the commandments is designed to prevent one from responding automatically to hunger or thirst; making as much of one's day, week and annual cycle, replete with actions that seek to deepen a sense of the Divine Presence and providence.

According to Jewish tradition not just ten commandments were given at Sinai, but six hundred and thirteen. Of course many of these related to the Temple, its *modus operandi* and the various offerings for different occasions. In addition many commandments are situational specific and often for specific individuals or groups. Then there are many which are conditional on situations that are not daily occurrences and may never confront one (e.g. removing a stumbling block before the blind) and there are those that are conditional on one having failed or transgressed other commandments. For example there is a commandment regarding procedure for marital divorce. Obviously divorce is not an ideal, but an accommodation to very human failing. Or another example might be the commandment to help your enemy lift up the load which is weighing down his donkey. Apart from the situational specificity of the commandment; it is also conditional on one having an enemy, in which case one has transgressed the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. Thus it is neither possible nor actually desirable to be in a position to observe all the commandments.

However Judaism is still made up of scores of social, ritual, festival and devotional commandments. In fact, the word commandment is insufficient to describe what Judaism describes in Hebrew as a "*mitzvah*". The word *mitzvah* is used also to simply mean a righteous deed. In fact the commandments are seen as acts of Godliness and godliness which imbue us with a sense of/a faith in God's Presence and His goodness, that should direct our own paths at all times.

Central to these is the Sabbath, described in the Jewish mystical tradition as Queen.

One of the most remarkable mediaeval intellectuals was the Muslim scholar Abu al-Rayhan Muhammad Al-Biruni. Al Biruni was a true renaissance man long before the Renaissance – a polymath, scientist, mathematician, astronomer, geographer, historian, linguist, sociologist and student of the religions both west and east. In this regard concerning the Abrahamic religions Al Biruni declares that if one wants to understand Islam, one must understand the *shehadeh* the Muslim declaration of faith; if one wants to understand Christianity, one needs to understand the concept of the Trinity; and if one wants to understand Judaism, one needs to understand the Sabbath. This is an enormously incisive insight in which Al Biruni reiterates the aforementioned comment that not only is Judaism less theological than both Christianity and even Islam; but one can only really understand it through its praxis; and in this regard the Sabbath has pride of place.

It is precisely through experiencing a totally different kind of day when so much of the demands of the week-day are prohibited by Jewish laws to intrude on a day devoted to family and community; a day devoted to rest, prayer, study, and celebratory meals; in which one experiences/is conscious of the Divine Presence within one, around one - in the Creation itself. Accordingly the celebration of the Sabbath as both the testament of Creation and Liberation (as reflected in the Exodus) is experienced in its very observance.

The scholar and biblical commentator Rabbi Benno Jacob wrote:-

“The Sabbath plants a heaven in the Jewish home, filling it with long expected and blissfully greeted peace; making the home a sanctuary, the father a priest, and the mother who lights the Sabbath candles an angel of light”.

Indeed throughout the darkest period of history, it has been within the Jewish home above all where the light of Divine providence has been experienced and thus faith strengthened and reinforced.

In fact, the home is the central place of Jewish experience as the central institution of Jewish life. Judaism can function without a synagogue; it can even function without a school/ a religious study centre; but it cannot survive without the home. Indeed the Jewish vibrancy of a Jewish home is very much reflected by the Sabbath within it. As a modern Jewish thinker, Pinchas Peli, stated:-

“Tell me what a Jew’s Sabbath is like; and I will tell you what kind of Jew he or she is.”

Moreover the nation as a whole and its faith is preserved through this experience. The Zionist philosopher Asher Ginzberg, known as Ahad Ha’Am, famously declared:-

“More than Israel has kept the Sabbath; it is the Sabbath that has kept Israel.”

Reference has been made, in the context of the Sabbath, to what has been described as the Jewish orientating historical experience – the Exodus. The term “orientating” has been used in the sense that the experience of liberation and redemption from slavery overwhelmingly animates the moral conscience and consciousness of Biblical ethics and the Jewish tradition based upon these.

However the most overt resuscitation of historical experience is in the annual Festivals.

The Hebrew calendar is replete with celebrations that not only rejoice in the agricultural seasons, but are precisely connected to the orientating experience of Jewish history. Indeed Jewish observance, the *mitzvot*, associated with these events seek to enable us in some small way to actually experience past history and the sense of the Divine salvific presence within it.

In the narrative recited at the Passover meal – the *Hagaddah* – we declare:-

“in each and every generation a person is obliged to see oneself as if one has actually gone out of Egypt oneself”.

Accordingly in keeping with precise Biblical injunctions, we actually ingest and imbibe the historical experience; eating bitter herbs to remember the bitterness and distaste of slavery; eating unleavened bread to remember the haste of our departure therefrom; toasting Divine liberation with celebratory cups of wine.

Another obvious example is the festival of *Sukkot*, Tabernacles, when we are actually meant to leave our homes and dwell in temporary booths of vegetative covering in accordance with Biblical prescription, in order to experience the vulnerability and overwhelming dependence on Providence by our ancestors on their way to the Promised Land. These annual experiences reinforce our daily practice in deepening our faith in God as the Presence in our lives and history.

For the Cabbalists however, there is an esoteric cosmology in which *mitzvot* do more than deepen our faith and God consciousness. They actually are the vehicle of cosmic redemption itself. A critical analysis might well suggest that the problem which this esoteric cosmology sought to address, was the dissonance between the Biblical and Prophetic call to advance righteousness justice and peace in the world; with the overwhelming hostile environment that the Jewish people had to contend with throughout most of its history and especially during the Middle Ages. How could we being about redemption, change for better in the world, when we were so vulnerable and subject to such violent oppression? The Cabbalistic doctrine provided an answer, in explaining that when one perform a *mitzvah* - even a seeming minor ritual act - one is actually generating a power that accumulates to change cosmic reality.

Accordingly the internal and even isolated religious observance of *mitzvot* by the individual and the community, has a salvific impact upon humanity at large. This is what they called “*tikkun olam*”, literally “mending” the world. In parenthesis, we might note the paradox that today this term is widely used to mean social activism and engagement for the betterment of society. We have primarily the Reform/Liberal strand of Judaism to thank for the transformation of this term. However, the Cabbalists who used the term to mean universal redemption, understood this as being achieved precisely through **not** being engaged with society at large, but despite that absence of engagement !

Today thank God, Jews live in a very different world - especially in North America; and the transformation of the term, is both poetic and reflective of that historically new reality.

Nevertheless while there is unquestionably a universal dimension and mission to Jewish observance; regardless of whether one “buys into” Cabbalistic cosmology or not, for traditional Judaism it has always been through the fulfilment of the *mitzvot*, that the sense of the Divine presence and the concomitant confidence, trust, faith in Divine goodness and fidelity, has been and continues to be experienced.