

A Christian Encounter with Judaism in Israel

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I will not speak to you as a scholar, but as a Christian from the 'grass roots', and I'll try to share with you something of my own discovery of Judaism, and how such a discovery can enrich our own faith. I spent about a year in Jerusalem, from September 2006 to June 2007. The purpose of my stay was not to study Judaism, but to have a sabbatical year, to study the Bible and to recover from a great fatigue.

But there were some events at the very beginning of my stay that put me on the track and led me to start exploring the Jewish world. And, let me tell you, there's no place in the world like Jerusalem for this!

I arrived at the beginning of the new Jewish year (according to their ancient calendar), during the autumn festivals, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) and *Sukkot* (Feast of the Tabernacles) and was more or less *drawn* into these feasts by the very atmosphere they created. I chose to continue on this path and participated during a whole year in the Jewish *Moadim* - that's the hebrew word for holiday which means 'encounter' or 'meeting'. A feast is really an appointment with God. I had never planned to do this, it was more like an attraction, a wonderment or an intuition that I followed, but I'd say that this is really one of the best ways to come to know Judaism, to get the taste for it - this exquisite flavor that I had never suspected. It was for me an astounding experience.

The Weight of the Past

During one of my very first walks in Jerusalem a Jewish boy with long hair locks came running up to me. He spat at me and then ran back to his parents who calmly continued their stroll, without scolding him or rebuking him in any way. I was with two people who did not wear a religious habit, so it was very obvious that I was aimed.

This was of course a great shock. I felt shame, anger and helplessness, and also a great surprise and incomprehension. I had very naïvely thought that the new attitude of the Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council (1962 - 1965) had healed for good the enmity between Jews and Christians. The former Pope John Paul II had been to Jerusalem in the February 2000 and asked forgiveness from the Jewish people for the sins that the Church had committed against them. From my Swedish perspective, born after the Second World War, I had never in my whole life experienced antisemitism, and the relationship between our two faiths in Sweden is generally without tension. So I thought everything was more or less in order now, that we were reconciled and could start enjoying each other's company.

But I didn't in fact have a clue of how deep the wounds are. Neither did it occur to me that an average Israeli Jew does not read papal documents. Many Jews don't know anything about the one hundred and eighty degree shift that the Church has made from an attitude of contempt to an attitude of, I'd say, esteem.

I have never been spit at before, but this was precisely a very big grace, I realised afterwards, given to me at the very start of my stay in Jerusalem: namely, to experience something - proportionally ridiculous but still something - of what the Jews have had to endure for centuries, if not for two millennia, from us, Christians.

This was really one of the incidents that gave me an impulse, or that stirred in me the desire to stretch out my hand to this people in order to get to know them, to learn from them, and also try to show this new face of the Church - the benevolent face, not only of the Church but of Christ himself - towards the Jewish people.

It was really very humiliating to realise what kind of face of Christ we have shown in history. It's not very astonishing that the Jews could not accept the cross as a symbol of salvation, because we have really crucified them. The symbol of the cross is, I discovered, for the Jews a symbol of death and persecution. I realised how deeply this aversion towards the cross symbol is engraved in the people when my quite young, easy-going and friendly hebrew teacher should draw a mathematical plus sign on the board. She drew one vertical line standing on a horizontal line without the lines actually crossing each other. Not even in mathematics could the cross be accepted!

How is it possible that the Church has shown such an appalling face of Jesus Christ?

I was lead to re-read the history of the Church with new glasses - the glasses of the Jews. And this was not a very pleasant discovery. Of course I knew that there had been forced baptisms and violations during some dark eras in the past, but I had always thought that it was something marginal, and for sure exaggerated. It was rather horrifying to discover what the Church has said and done in the name of Christ: cruel persecutions, slaughter, torture, degradations, expulsions, condemnations of their sacred scriptures... I had always thought, and justly so, that Nazism had nothing to do with Christianity, but finally I had to admit that the Church had prepared the ground for this ideology, and was co-responsible for the Shoah, because of her "preaching of contempt". Already the church father Augustine wrote in the third century that the reason the Jews still existed as a people, though the Church in fact had "replaced" them, was that the Christians could look at the Jews and realise their own superiority.

It's not in fifty years that you heal such a heavy guilt burden.

Many important steps have been taken though. The people who was once considered cursed by God, is now declared blessed, by the Church. The dogmatic constitution *Nostra Aetate* (1965) declares that the Church was wrong when she taught that the Jewish people had lost their distinction as a chosen people. God cannot take back his promises. The first Covenant remains valid and the Jews are our elder brothers. In this same document the Church also takes back the accusation that the Jews were guilty of the crucifixion of Christ - the guilt is really on humanity as a whole. The document points out that Jesus himself, the Virgin Mary, the first disciples and the first Christians were all Jews, and that's another reason why this people must be honored.

As a response to this new attitude there have been positive Jewish reactions, also on an official level - even though Judaism does not have (and will never have) a Magisterium or a pope! Jewish theologians have expressed their joy that "through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel". (*Dabru Emet*, 2000, signed by 220 rabbis and theologians)

The Fresh Olive Root

Another event that set me on this journey into Judaism also occurred in the beginning of my stay in Jerusalem. I was invited to join the celebration of *Simchat Torah*, the Feast of

the Torah, which is the last day of the Feast of the Tabernacles. It's like the summit of this Festival Period when the people dance with the Torah scrolls. It's also called 'the eighth day', a realisation of the World to come, the eternal life. This is the most joyful day, when the people cherish their eternal inheritance, which is the Torah, the Word of God.

I was very lucky to be invited to an Orthodox Synagogue where also the women participated in the dance. (That's not always the case among Orthodox Jews) It was an amazing experience. I was overwhelmed by the presence of God, and by what I perceived as an intense, intimate, vibrant, joyful - and at the same time very relaxed - relationship to God the Father.

How is this possible without faith in Jesus Christ? Didn't he say: "No one can come to the Father, but through me"?

This evening it became absolutely clear to me, manifest before my eyes, that the privileged relationship between the Jewish people and God, through the Torah, has not been abolished by *our* relation to God through Christ - the Word of God. It was like a Copernican revolution to start thinking that it is *thanks to Christ*, our Jewish brother, that we have been *grafted* into *their* exclusive relationship to the Father.

"If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you." (Rm 11:17-18)

This is a humbling - not a humiliating, but a humbling insight! As a wild olive, I was struck by the freshness of this "nourishing sap" from the root. And quite naturally I decided to get to know my own roots better.

As a Christian, I confess that the Jew Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, is God Incarnate. My whole existence is bound to the fact that Jesus Christ has reconciled the world to God, through his Incarnation, death on the cross, Resurrection from the dead, Ascension to heaven and gift of the Holy Spirit.

This credo is for a Jew a blasphemy. It's absolutely unthinkable that the transcendent, ever holy Divinity should take flesh and be born by a woman. So that which is the very foundation of our faith - and our life - is at the same time *the* stumbling block for the Jews.

How is it possible to have a dialogue with that starting-point? Should we not try to convert them?

First of all, I think, we have to convert ourselves. We have not preached Christ in a way that has revealed his glory. We have not aroused the envy of the Jewish people, as was once the hope of St Paul (Rm 11:14). We have not succeeded in convincing them that the promises that are ours, are richer or more life transforming than their own. Simply because they aren't! Christ has given us part in *their* promises: "In Christ Jesus the Gentiles are now *co-heirs* with the Jews, members of the same body and *sharers* of the *same* promise..." (Ef. 3:6)

Before we preach Jesus Christ to the Jews I think we have to preach Jesus Christ to ourselves, i.e. get to know him as the Jew he actually was. "If you meet Jesus Christ, you

meet Judaism”, said Pope John Paul II. If we don’t know anything about Judaism, aren’t we lacking something in our knowledge of Jesus Christ?

To meet ”the Other”

The Church somehow has to get down on her knees, and receive something from ‘the other’. What a wonderful challenge for the Church: to respect ‘the other’, to renounce it’s omnipotence, to enter a dialogue that is purely free, disinterested, without any secret motive of manipulation.

This doesn’t have to be a compromise with truth. We don’t have to renounce our faith in Christ as the savior of the world. But we might have to renounce our fixed ”programs” as how the Word of God should reveal himself to the Jewish people, and how they are to receive it. Maybe, already they *do* receive the living word of God?

Such a discovery is not necessarily a concession. Could it be a gain?

By opening up to the other, the stranger, the different, we are coming close to the very heart of God himself. In the Jewish tradition, when God created the world he ”withdrew” in order to give space to creation, just like the sea retires to give space to dry land. The hebrew verb ’to create’, *bara*, has this meaning of retraction. The Jewish mystics compared creation to a childbirth: God ”retracted”, in order to give space to *the other*, that he would show an infinite respect. And since we are created in the image of God, that’s the way we are called to relate. The jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995) has said: ”I can only reach the realisation of my being, if I can meet face to face the one who is different from me, the stranger.”

Maybe God never wanted the jews to receive the Word of God in exactly the same way as we do, in order to keep this people a distinguished entity, because even the Church needs the one who is different at her side? In the Gospels, Jesus sends his Apostles to teach the Nations. But precisely, the Jews are not part of the Nations. It is as if the chosen people were kept as an indispensable vis-à-vis to humanity.

Let’s say that all the Jews would have accepted Jesus as Messiah after the Ressurrection. What would have happened? Either Judaism would have been completely swallowed up by the *goyim* - and disappeared altogether, as it happened in the Church; or, all the nations would have had to become ”Jewish”. Both solutions would have been a loss. But now Judaism remains a separate entity, a people in it’s own right, and this is a tremendous chance for us. The Pope Benedict XIV proclaims that the People of God is the Church *and* the Jewish people together.

If Christians can adopt an attitude of humble respect towards the jewish people I believe this is certainly the best way to pave the way for the jews to accept Christ as the one who *leads the nations into their calling*. And thus fulfills it.

The vocation of the Jewish people is to be an instrument of a universal salvation. God said to Abraham: ”In you all the nations shall be blessed”. And this has actually happened through Christ, who was given to us, Gentiles, from the Jews.

”Christianity is the tree that grows out of the seed of judaism and that covers the whole earth with it’s shadow, but the fruit of this tree has to contain again the seed.”, said the jewish poet and philosopher Juda Halévy (1075-1141).

But this seed has been buried in darkness for centuries. We have so much to discover in their tradition; deep values and insights that we have forgotten or lost.

The Torah - a Way of Life

Let's look at the concept of Torah for example. We often translate the word by "law", but it's a terribly poor translation. The Torah is so much more than a book of laws, (it's not even a book, because there is also the oral tradition) and something much deeper than only a teaching. The word is derived from the root *y r h*, which means to shoot an arrow in a specific direction. The Torah is a word that indicates direction and aim. It reveals the way. The most accurate word for Torah is perhaps 'revelation'. Jews talk about *Torat Chajim*, The Torah of life, and *Torat Emet*, Torah of Truth. Torah is the way, the truth and the life. When Jesus says, I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, he is actually saying. "I am the living Torah".

Jewish tradition teaches that the Torah existed before creation. You come very close to their understanding of the eternal Torah, when you read the prologue of St John: "In the beginning was the Word." So the greek word *logos* might very well be a much better translation of Torah, than *nomos*, law.

Torah reveals an "order of creation", an order of relatedness, i.e. of justice. The greek word *logos* actually also contains this meaning, a *reasonable* order. That which holds together the universe.

To live according to the Torah is not to execute precepts, but to enter a way of life that puts you in contact with the living God and the essence of His Being which is mercy and justice. This contact is so real, that the Jews were able to affirm, long before Christ, the resurrection of the dead! They were living by a word that contained LIFE a life that could not be destroyed. This presupposes faith, because ultimately it is faith that puts in contact with God (cf Abraham). For the Jews you cannot execute one single precept of the Torah without faith. Or if you do, you do not fulfill the precept.

To me, as a simple lay person (not a theologian) it seems clear that this Word IS Christ. So, there's a secret here. Something to discover. And also a problem. It is as if the Jews were faithful to Christ by following the Torah, but they could never accept Jesus as the living Torah. So how could such premisses stand together in a coherent way? I don't know. Maybe it's impossible. St Paul was not able to formulate it clearly, even though he groped for the answer.

Brother Antoine asked me to speak about problems, so here's definitely one. But, a problem is not necessarily something negative. I want to stress this. For the Jews there is nothing as exciting and pleasurable as a real debate when you really disagree. We often perceive opposition as an aggression, but it could also be a sign of friendship: a tremendous opportunity to make a stride forward, in our own faith, in our own relationship to God, in our own joy of living!

An authentic debate, according to jewish tradition, is made for the sake of heaven, *le shem shamayim*. It's a foretaste of heaven. But such a debate is not made up of arguments to prove that you are superior. It's more like a game, a play, a joyful dance.

So maybe we are allowed to enjoy our distinctions and take delight in the problems? Of course not in a light or superficial way. If there is one problem to really take seriously I'd say it's our past, and we can't initiate dialogue without first having made *teshuvah*,

repentance, which means "to come to oneself" and realise the weight of our past. (This doesn't mean that we have to run around and apologize, which would only be embarrassing. It's more something of a sobering self-knowledge.)

A Future for Jewish-Christian Dialogue

In Israel I met Christians who approach Judaism with this attitude of infinite respect and curiosity, and it was wonderful to see how this paved the way for a new relationship, as if the Jews actually only waited for this. Monasteries have been founded in Israel after the Second Vatican Council with the specific aim of promoting a dialogue with Judaism, and it's a fact that they attract very many Jews, both secular and religious. With a mutual recognition, so much is possible. Only in this way Jews can start taking any interest whatsoever in our own faith. So far, the Jewish-Christian dialogue has been rather one-sided. We Christians have much to gain in this dialogue, but the Jews generally don't see what they can receive from us. But it's starting to change. And it very much depends on us. The french Jew, Colette Kessler, a pioneer in Jewish-Christian dialogie writes:

*"The Christian is to me not just any goy (gentile). He is the non-jew who stands closest to us, even though through many centuries he was our enemy. The Christian has been grafted on us through the Jew Jesus."*¹

During my year in Jerusalem I was invited to a Jewish *seder pesach*, the Jewish Pascal Meal. The family father, Michael, asked the guests to present themselves. In order to get to know each other, he suggested that each one mention a person that we'd like to take with us to this evening. Since he spoke hebrew I hadn't understood it all, but he helped me on the way: "Maybe you would like to invite your spiritual ancestor?" he said. What did he mean? "Jesus." Others had mentioned Moses or their great grand mother from Ukraina, so he didn't talk about the risen Lord, but still... I was very touched that Jesus was welcomed at the table of a Jewish seder. Especially so since *Pesach* in the past very often was the most dangerous times for Jews, beacuse of Christian pogroms.

At the end of the meal, my neighbour thanked me: "It has enriched my seder, sharing it with a Christian." I discovered actually that there is a great love for Jesus among Jews. It's really our attitude that have prevented them from loving him more.

I think this is maybe what we have to do: to honor the Jewish tradition, so that they may feel enriched, respected in their own right - and this can only be an enrichment for us as well.

I'll end by quoting st Paul, who struggled to formulate theologically the relationship between Judaism and the Church without really succeeding (Rm 9-11). In the end he gave up and burst into praise:

"Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the Glory for ever!"

(Rom. 11:33-36)

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¹ Colette Kessler (2004), L'éclair de la Rencontre, Juifs et Chrétiens ensemble, témoins de Dieu, p. 164