



The Relevance of Tradition and Change for Interreligious Dialogue: A Jewish Perspective

Rabbi Abraham Skorka | 31.08.2017

Address given during the opening event of ICCJ's annual conference, Bonn, Germany, July 2, 2017.

The topics of Tradition and Change are vast. We need to analyze the relationship between them in order to perceive their relevance for interreligious dialogue.

A superficial look at the two terms—Tradition and Change—could lead us to the conclusion that they are opposites: two different concepts that could never come together. We might think that this categorical difference gives rise to the potential for fundamentalism found in all religions, in the past as well as in the present.

However, since life is dynamic and energetic, all its aspects are also dynamic—including religion. Of course, there are certain elements in all religions that are defining and unchangeable, such as, in Judaism, faith in a spiritual, transcendental and unique God who requires Justice and Mercy from each human being. But there are other aspects of religion that are continuously changing. They especially involve the practical aspects of each religion and its expression in the actions of everyday life.

According to the Bible, God is a “living God”^[1], *Elo-him Hayim*, and therefore in certain respects is constantly active and changing. It is not in the character of idols to be dynamic.

In his article, *Neviei Sheker*^[2] (*The False Prophets*), Martin Buber studied the dynamism of the biblical God while conversing with the Prophets. He examined the strange story of the encounter between ?ananiah ben Azur and Jeremiah that is described in Jeremiah chapters 27-28. God had given to Jeremiah the order to wear a yoke on his neck and to declare in the name of God that this yoke symbolized that the people of Judah would have to endure the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon. ?ananiah from Gibeon appeared on the scene and said that God told him the opposite, that Nebuchadnezzar’s yoke would be removed from the people. Jeremiah’s reaction was astonishment! He said to ?ananiah: Amen! May the Lord do so. Buber resolved these contradictory prophecies by proposing the understanding of God as a living God who could, so to speak, change perceptions from one moment to the other. Jeremiah understood that he had to speak again with God; maybe God had changed His Mind in the meanwhile. Only after God’s revelation, saying to him that ?ananiah had prophesied falsely (28:12-17), Jeremiah could face again Hananiah.

Also relevant to the relation between Change and Tradition is, what is undoubtedly one of the most important religious movements in Jewish religiosity in the last 250 years: *Hasidism*. One of the great masters in this movement was Rabbi Menachem Mendl Morgensztern, the famous Rebbe of Kotzk. One of his renowned aphorisms is: “Everything in the world can be imitated, except truth, for truth that is imitated is no longer truth.”^[3]

What does it mean that we cannot imitate truths? Our beliefs are the things that we consider the truth and upon which we build our lives. Is it not right to pray with the same prayers that our ancestors did? We as Jews continue reciting—or, if you will, imitating—prayers written centuries ago. And so did the Kotzker Rebbe. So, how should we understand his aphorism?

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the ?asidic movement, explained why in the beginning of our

most important prayer we Jews turn to God with the words: God of our Patriarchs, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob and not with the formula: God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The reason is because each one of the Patriarchs searched by himself for God's presence in his life and how personally he should be best serve God. They could not simply take upon themselves the existential experience of their ancestors.^[4] Just as the relationship between God and each individual Patriarch was different, so our relationship with God must also be distinct to us personally. The words of our prayers are the same since centuries ago, but the intentionality, the interpretation of them by each one of us is and must be different.

In the Talmudic tractate of *Menahot* 29,b we read:

Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rav: When Moses went up on high, he found the Holy One sitting and tying crowns on the letters of the Torah [embellishing each letter with calligraphic marks.] He said to the Holy One: "Ruler of the Universe, who detains Your hand?" He said to him: "There is a man who will appear at the end of several generations and Akiva the son of Joseph is his name and he will need these crowns, because from each and every thorn [calligraphic mark above the letter] he will derive scores and scores of commandments." He said to Him, "Ruler of the Universe, show me this man." The Holy One said, "Turn around!"

[So Moses] went and sat at the end of the eight rows [of students listening to Rabbi Akiva interpret Torah], but could not understand what they were saying. His strength was deflated. When he arrived at a particular subject, his students asked him: "Master! Where are you getting this from?" He said, "It's a law of Moses from Sinai." Moses was relieved.

This is a revealing Talmudic story. Moses, the man who spoke face to face with God and received the commandments from God is not able to understand the discussions around the same laws as developed by Rabbi Akiva and his students fourteen generations later. The end of the story reveals to us that the essence of the norms is the same, that certain things which were accepted as part of the tradition were not even changed. The Torah is not a compendium of unambiguously explicit laws, but a collection of principles of ethics and justice from which the sages in each generation must deduce their application in accord with the changes of their respective situations.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin Chapter 4, page 22, column a, halachah 2; we read:

Rabbi Yanai said: If the Torah had been given with unambiguously explicit laws, [the world] wouldn't have a foundation to stand on. ... Moses asked God: "Lord of the world! Teach me the halacha [the application of the law so that there will be no doubts]!" And the Almighty told him: "after the majority you should follow" (Exodus 23:2). ... If the majority says 'innocent,' declare the accused innocent; if the majority says 'guilty,' declare the accused guilty. [This is] so that the Torah may be expounded in forty-nine ways on the side of a decision of uncleanness, and in forty-nine ways in favor of a decision of cleanness."

One major characteristic of the Talmudic literature, then, is that it primarily presents discussions about the interpretations or the application of the commandments. Then, only as a secondary matter, does it address the way to choose the universally accepted opinion. Of course, there are many unchangeable norms and precepts, but based upon them, how the law is to be put into practice must be deduced in the context of the new circumstances experienced by each generation. The Jewish tradition has canonized the Talmuds of Jerusalem and of Babylon, given rise to the literature of the Responsa, and added thousands of books that compile the perspectives of the rabbinical sages of each generation and from the scattered places of the Jewish Diaspora ever since the Middle Ages until today. Clearly, the Halachah is an evolutionary matter.

Another impressive and fundamental Talmudic story from which we learn of the deduction of the laws from the Torah principles is known as "The Oven of Akhnai" in Baba Metzia 59 a, b. The story

tells about the rabbinic discussion about the defilement of an oven made from different pieces of clay and having sand between them. Rabbi Eliezer considered that such an oven was not susceptible to defilement because it could not be considered a utensil; the other sages considered that such an oven must be considered a utensil.

On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but the Sages did not accept any of them. Finally, he said to them: "If the Halakha is in accordance with me, let this carob tree prove it!" The carob tree immediately uprooted itself and moved one hundred cubits, and some say 400 cubits, from its place. "No proof can be brought from a carob tree," they retorted.

And again, he said to them "If the Halakha agrees with me, let the channel of water prove it!" The channel of water flowed backward. "No proof can be brought from a channel of water," they rejoined.

Again, he urged, "If the Halakha agrees with me, let the walls of the house of study prove it!" The walls tilted as if to fall. But R. Joshua, rebuked the walls, saying, "When disciples of the wise are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what right have you to interfere?" Hence in deference to R. Joshua they did not fall and in deference to R. Eliezer they did not resume their upright position; they are still standing aslant.

Again R. Eliezer then said to the Sages, "If the Halakha agrees with me, let it be proved from heaven." A heavenly voice cried out, "Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, with whom the Halakha always agrees?" R. Joshua stood up and protested: "The Torah is not in heaven!" (Deut. 30:12). What does it mean that the Torah is not in heaven? R. Yermiah explained that: "We pay no attention to a heavenly voice because long ago at Mount Sinai You wrote in your Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline' (Ex. 23:2)."

The story continues and has many other very interesting aspects, but my intention here is to stress the fact that this story sets in place a cornerstone in the rabbinical way of proceeding in the interpretation of the Torah. The great message given by the sages is that: the Torah is from heaven but she requires a continuous human interpretation for its application. No one can say in the future: I have received the definitive interpretation from God Himself and must be obeyed. This is because the final word must always remain within the human condition immersed in time and space, grounded on the great biblical principles.

Going back to the biblical literature, we can clearly see the concept of renewal in the relationship of God and the people of Israel. The covenant that God performed with the people of Israel in Sinai (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5) is clearly remade with the new generation before Moses death, as it is described in Deuteronomy 29: 9-28; and remade again by the next generation during the last days of Joshua (Chap.23).

In the days of Hezekiah, some very important changes in certain religious practices were made in the Kingdom of Judah, as it is described in Kings 2, 18:1-6; and something similar took place in the days of the King Josiah some years later, as we can read in Kings 2, Chapter 22.

Religion is an essential part of life, and life at large requires a constant revision of things. Amos Oz's testimonies in "The Slopes of a Volcano" ("*Al midronot har ga'ash*") is a very good example of what spiritual dynamism means. Oz describes the internal evolution in his attitudes toward the German people after the terrible things he heard in his childhood when the atrocities of the *Shoah* became known until he discovered the new reality in which the Germans are living in today. Similarly, those who gathered at the "Emergency Conference on Antisemitism" seventy years ago and gave us the "Ten Points of Seelisberg" struggled to reform Christian ideas about Jews and Judaism in the aftermath of the Nazi genocide. In the same way, *Nostra Aetate*, the famous document that emerged from the Second Vatican Council, left an immovable benchmark for the future of Jewish-Christian

relations. Both Seelisberg and *Nostra Aetate* resulted from the need to reform Christian theology concerning the validity of the Old Covenant as the Jewish way for human redemption. Both documents recognized that something had been wrong in the core of Christian understanding.

Another impressive change from the field of international politics provides a very good example for future political leaders. I refer to the courageous decision of the late president of Egypt Anwar el-Sadat to come to Jerusalem in order to put an end to the state of belligerence between Egypt and Israel. He paid for that choice with his life, but he set a cornerstone for peace between the two states and left an indelible paradigm for the Middle East and the whole world.

The influence of religious leaders for good or for bad is powerful in our day. Religions will inevitably play a very important role in human reality of the twenty-first century. The demanding times in which we are living dramatically require from us, in Abraham Joshua Heschel's phrases, moral grandeur and spiritual audacity. For real interfaith dialogue, we need a special renewed and reform dynamism that must be built up from the inside of each one of the religions. Dialogue is the most powerful weapon that we, persons of spirituality, have in our hands to help an ailing humanity find its way to peace and understanding. Humanity, since the days when Cain killed Abel, has been enmeshed in cycles of hate, prejudice, and misunderstanding. Our ability to hear others is diminished, and we like to hear only ourselves or those who are similar to us. Isaiah and the prophets of his generation saw in their visions a world of peace that God reveals to the whole of humanity. That voice of God will be heard when each person is able to hear the voice of his or her neighbor. To achieve that, a deep reformation of each person's attitudes must be undertaken.

That ability to learn from our differences, perhaps especially from the different experiences of God in our respective religious traditions, is a skill that is best acquired through interreligious dialogue. As we have already begun to see from our dialogue thus far, encountering the other stimulates us to Reform or to Change how we comprehend and enact our religious Tradition.

Footnotes

[1] Deuteronomy 5:22; Samuel I 17:26,36.

[2] Martin Buber, *Darko Shel Mikra* (Bialik Institute, 5738-1968), pp. 119-122.

[3] Martin Buber, *Tales of Hasidim: Late Masters* (New York, Schocken, 1961) p. 284.

[4] הבעל שם טוב הק' על פרשת וַיִּצְאָ - בית הבעל שם טוב, בראשית כח יג.

[5] In accordance to the midrash of the verse given in Mishnah Sanhedrin 1:6.

Editorial remarks

Rabbi Skorka is Rector of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano 'M.T. Meyer', Buenos Aires, Argentina.