YESHIVAT HAR ETZION VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH PROJECT (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE KUZARI:

AN INTRODUCTION TO JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

by Prof. Shalom Rosenberg

Lecture #15b: Our Attitude to Christianity

            Rihal's discussion of Christianity compels us to briefly touch upon a problematic issue: Judaism's approach to Christianity.  Our response to Christianity contains a dual argument: a dispute over facts and a debate regarding value-judgments.  Thus, the Jewish response to Christianity contains a factual-historical argument about the beginnings of Christianity, and about Jesus' character in particular, as well as a question of religious values: how ought we as Jews to judge the historical occurrences which heralded the advent of Christianity and the results of those events.

            Although this is not a historical work, the answer to the first question bears tremendous importance.  I say this despite the fact that any explanation will necessarily be disputed.  I believe that in order to establish our attitude towards Christianity, an examination of the historical background must be performed.  Without entering upon a discussion of the details, I will simply state that we must differentiate between different stages in the historical development of Christianity.  A large part of this lecture is based upon a historical and literary analysis of the sources of Christianity by the Rashbatz (Rabbi Shimon Ben Tzemach Duran), in his book Keshet U-Magen (Bow And Shield).  The Rashbatz' analysis is in full accord with that of current major Jewish historians.  Were we to attempt to delve into Christianity's past, as if it were an archeological site, we would uncover at least four layers: 1. Jesus' position;  2. the Apostles;  3. Paul;  4. the Christian Church.  We can view this structure as  an upside-down pyramid, in which each layer adds to the previous one.  Our starting point will be Jesus' position.

1.  Christianity's beginnings

             The historical problems regarding the beginnings of Christianity are far-reaching indeed.  Did Jesus truly live and breathe or is his existence a mere legend?  Responses to this question can be divided into two opposing camps.  On the one hand, we find those who support a positive verdict, and on the other, those who claim that there is no historical basis for the legends concerning Jesus.  This was the position taken by many German scholars, who viewed all the data found in the works of the ancients with dubious skepticism.  Nevertheless, in the name of many of these scholars  we may cynically report that Jesus the Christian never existed, and yet the Jews killed him.  The historical truth  hidden in this remark is that the historical criticism surrounding the character of Jesus has not succeeded in calming the tempest of antisemitism; for the skepticism regarding Jesus' existence was actually a result of this antisemitism.  Many people simply could not accept the fact that the central religious figure of Christianity was Jewish.  As a result, some denied the historical dimensions of the beginning of Christianity, while others chose to ignore Jesus' Jewishness, or created theological theories to somehow justify this strange aberration.

            On the other side of the spectrum we find scholars who claim that Jesus did indeed exist.  These scholars actually use Jewish sources to prove the reliability of their position.  The Rabbinic sources for many sayings and parables attributed to Jesus strengthen this point of view.  Personally, I agree with this position.  Jesus' Jewish background enables us to understand the differences and disagreements that existed between the Jewish community and  Jesus himself.  Thus, it appears that the Jewish traditions that speak of the historicity of Jesus were correct.

            Of course, many points of controversy exist even among the scholars who maintain that Jesus was a historical figure.  One such controversial issue is the subject of Jesus' death.  There is no doubt that Jesus was crucified by the Romans because of their fear of the awakening of a messianic political movement.  Crucifixion was a singularly Roman method of capital punishment.  However, at a later stage the Christians developed the idea that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus.  Jesus died a Roman death at the hands of the Romans, as a direct result of the decision of the Romans and perhaps some collaborators.  There is no clearer proof for Jesus' death as a Jew at the hand of the Romans' than the crown of thorns that, according to Christian sources, the Romans placed upon Jesus' head.  This was a mocking proclamation of Jesus as the King of the Jews, a King who wears a crown of thorns, in place of a crown of gold.  In this manner, the Roman ridiculed Jesus' belief in himself as the messiah.

            Apparently Jesus did believe that he was the Messiah.  Clearly, the events of his life can only be understood on this background, and on the assumption that Jesus expected a last-minute miracle which would prove his messianic status.  Jesus was a false Messiah; however, we must note that the various false Messiahs that Jewish history has known can be divided into two types: those who were consciously impostors, and those who succeeded in convincing themselves of their own messianic role.  Jesus cannot be counted among the former; he was honest.  He was simply mistaken in his unswerving belief that he was God's destined messenger.  It is interesting to compare Jesus to Shabtai Zvi, who also viewed himself as the messenger of God.  At the critical moment, Shabtai Zvi faltered and converted.  Jesus did not, perhaps because he expected a miracle, and believed that no evil could befall  the Messiah.  Therefore his last words were "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?"  Jesus' followers remembered and immortalized these words, because they felt that every word that he uttered was significant.  Yet, these words in fact bear witness to his failure; for the miracle failed to materialize, and Jesus died face to face with his own failure.

            Jesus constitutes a chapter in the history of the Jewish nation's false messiahs.

            With regard to Jesus' specific identity, allow me to quote from the Rashbatz' book:

"...and I heard that the Tosafists wrote, and I saw in the polemic of Rabbi Yechiel the son of Rabbi Yosef the Frenchman, that Jesus the Christian of whom our sages spoke, who lived in the time of Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Perachia, was not the one of whom the Christians spoke in their scriptures; rather, he is the one mentioned in the Talmudic chapter "Arba Mitot" (four types of capital punishment inflicted by Jewish courts) that they prepared witnesses for him, and his name was the son of Pandira. ... and as they said of Jesus that he was hung on  the eve of Passover, as they said of the son of Satdai."

            The Rashbatz himself accepts the identification of Jesus with the student of Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Perachia.  Today, we tend to accept the opinion of Rabbi Yechiel the Frenchman.

2. - 3.  The Apostles and Paul

            Jesus  can be described as the classic figure of a problematic preacher.  Some of his opinions conflicted with Jewish law, although the majority of is statements were firmly rooted in Chazal.  However, as aforementioned, Jesus was not satisfied with the position of preacher or Rabbi.  He saw himself as the Messiah, and he understood that his death meant the failure of his mission.  His disciples explained their leader's death differently.  They viewed his death as the end of one chapter in the divine plan.  This belief inspired the concept of the second coming, the faith that Jesus will be resurrected and will complete his mission in the future.  Jesus considered his messianic aspirations a failure; Paul interpreted the failure as a victory.  It was Paul who devised and developed a comprehensive doctrine, explaining that the redemption need not be manifest in this world, and that Jesus' death was necessary in order to open the gates of Heaven to all.

            Paul's significant innovation is rooted in two major upheavals that totally distanced Christianity from Judaism.  The differences between Christianity and Judaism, according to the original disciples, revolved around the person of the 'Messiah.'  Paul, however, stressed two principles which later became integral to Christianity:

1. The annulment of the required observance of practical commandments.  Jesus' original disciples  remained faithful to the practical commandments.  For Paul, however, the belief in Jesus as the messiah became central, and took the place of the original commandments.  Thus, a new religious option opened up and Christianity won the battle to convert the nations of the world.  For this approach gave them a short cut, which in time turned out to be a long cut leading to a dead end.  Rav Kook writes (Orot Ha-emuna 9):

"The essence of heresy is the separation of the concept of fear of heaven and the principle of closeness to God from the light of Torah and all its operative manifestations.  And as a result of this separation, which was performed maliciously from within the Jewish nation, ... the world became polluted.  Pagan impurity found a foothold and a source of sustenance, until the end of days, when 'with the drying of its branches, they will break.'"

            Rav Kook describes this development, which was expressed through the approach of Paul and his followers:

"And the separation of the principle of the fear of God from the observance of the Torah grew to the point that separation alone did not suffice, but rather this poison [ous idea] reached the level of contradiction, to the extent that the evil maidservant dared to conclude that her fraudulent concept of Fear was the real one, and that it necessitated the nullification and destruction of the observance of the Torah and its study..."

            The Pauline separation between faith and commandments, between Torah and prophecy, letter and spirit, created a legacy of hatred.  Christianity attacked Judaism and its representatives, the Pharisees, in the name of faith ("the fraudulent concept of Fear") that rejects all the commandments and views them as mere external trappings.  The inevitable result was that "the external world of the nations moved out of reach of the internal influence of the Jewish nation."

            With the nullification of the operational commandments, Paul abandoned Jesus' principles.  In the words of the Rashbatz: "When they saw that Jesus of Nazareth said that he did not come to nullify the Torah but rather to strengthen it, they found proof from his words that he nullified the Torah."

           And even given a certain degree of ambiguity in Jesus' words, the Rashbatz maintains that, "from all this it does not appear that he contradicted the Torah."

            Paul explained the commandments allegorically and nullified them.  But as the Rashbatz explains, "The all-encompassing response to [the fraudulent Pauline doctrine] ... is that the Torah speaks plainly and not in riddles."

2. We have already alluded to the second principle, which later became a central theme in Christianity.  I refer to the doctrine of original sin.  According to this doctrine, the world began in sin.  The original sin occurred as follows: Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, and therefore all of his descendants were to be forever tainted with guilt, a stain that could never be erased.  Thus Jesus the son of God (a later development, the doctrine of incarnation, describes Jesus as God Himself, in human form) had to appear and die on the cross in order to atone for the sin of the Adam.  The Rashbatz writes:

"And when they saw all of this they clung to their fraudulent ideas and claimed that the forefathers and the prophets and all of the greatest pious men were possessed by Satan as a result of the sin of Adam who was expelled from the Garden of Eden, and that they were descending to hell.  Because [Adam's] ... sin was attached to him and his children at the outset of human procreation they called it 'original'....  No one human being had the power to atone for this sin until God took on human form in the womb of a woman, and became both a God and a human, and then his blood was spilled and that blood atoned for the original sin... and our master the Ramban already remarked regarding this in his debate 'If one intends to lie, he ought to distance his witnesses,' for all of the curses that Adam and Eve and the serpent received because of that sin, we still see today [and therefore clearly] they remain and were not atoned for."

            The Rashbatz demonstrates that these ideas were rejected by Jesus himself and by his student Simon Kifa-Patros who clearly stated that the Jews achieve salvation through the Torah.  However, in its later development Christianity's path diverged from this original concept of salvation, and maintained that all humans share the verdict of perdition as the direct result of the sin of Adam.  Faith in Jesus and the performance of the obligatory Christian rituals constitute the only possible escape from hellfire.  This attitude clearly contradicts the biblical outlook, which defines messianism as the improvement of the world under the dominion of God.  One of the elemental differences between Judaism and Christianity stems from this disparity.  The Christians continued to speak of the kingdom of Heaven; however, a seemingly insignificant change in terminology took place.  Our forefathers spoke of the kingdom of heaven as a kingdom which ruled OVER heaven and earth.  The Christians, on the other hand, spoke of a kingdom IN heaven.  How can we believe in the messianity of a man who did not mend the world?  If the world was not mended in his day, then clearly he is not the messiah.  What has changed in our world as a result of Jesus' existence?  As a matter of fact, the world has perhaps taken a turn for the worse.  Paul's position attempted to solve this theological difficulty.  Paul, and Christian theology in his wake, altered the concept of improvement and transferred messianism from the earth to the heavens.  What was Jesus' accomplishment?  He opened the gates of the Garden of Eden.  Until his advent it was impossible for man to enter the Garden of Eden, and even righteous men such as the forefathers, Moses and the prophet Isaiah did not merit entry.

            The Rashbatz explains that early Christianity developed with the belief that complete redemption would occur during the lifetimes of  Jesus' disciples: "And (Jesus) then said 'I am truthfully telling you that this generation will not die out before all is completed.'  And all this did not materialize, and [therefore] their intelligent ones had to interpret 'this generation' to mean from Jesus until the end of days and judgment day... but the plain meaning of his words is not like this...  In another place it says that Jesus said to his students 'I am truthfully telling you that some those standing here will not taste death before they see the son of Man in his Kingdom' ...and behold the reality refuted this."

4. The Church and Christian Antisemitism

            The fourth stage is the development of the Christian faith and its alienation from Judaism.  At this stage, idolatry penetrated into Christianity and exerted its influence upon Christian theology.  Jesus' transition from a Messiah and 'son of God' into God himself took place at this point.  Belief in the trinity commingled with belief in monotheism, and the Virgin Mary, mother of the messiah, was granted a unique status.

            This stage marks the complete alienation of Christianity from Judaism.  This religious abyss developed into open hatred.  As history was later to demonstrate, Christian antisemitism began its career at this juncture.  Christian antisemitism stemmed, in part, from the fact that the Jews refused to accept the "new gospel" (this historical impetus for antisemitism would later repeat itself in Islam and Lutheranism).  However, some content-relevant reasons existed as well.  Allow me to explain.  On the one hand, Christianity "attempts to approach the holy archetype, to wrap itself in the prayer shawl and rabbinical garb."  But on the other, "it is worse than idol worship, for it clamors to alter the form of Jewish holiness into a monster." (ibid. 15)

            Rav Kook tells us  that Judaism and paganism are 'the two original elements' that contend throughout history (Le-mahalakh ha-idei'ot be-Israel, Orot 113).  Christianity is the result of the 'grafting' of these two elements.  Two great thinkers realized this essential fact: Hegel, the great nineteenth century thinker, who saw himself as the vanguard of the new Christianity, and on the other hand, Rav Kook.  A tremendous historical difficulty stems from the fact that although Christianity saw itself as advocate of the Bible and abdicator of the Talmud, in reality the opposite holds true.  For Christianity abandoned the primary biblical concept, the 'Divine Idea' (see Le-mahalakh ibid.) which permeates and influences each and every sphere of life and extends far beyond the four cubits of religious observance.

            This combination carries severe psychological ramifications.  Christianity spread Judaism's roots throughout the nations.  However, some nations "did not yet attain this level, and [therefore] what was infused into their surroundings from the light of Israel was the faith in God, not in accordance with [the progress of] their natural [moral] development, [and therefore it] contended with their individual personalities and clashed with their cultures, for [the light] was alien, external" (Orot, Orot ha-techiya, 88). However, Rav Kook assures us that we will witness a process "that will redeem the sparks of the spirit of Israel ... and this will cause increased hatred of Israel."  Without a doubt this is a marvelous description of the revolution of idolatry.

Rihal's Presentation

            At the outset of the first discourse (1:4-5), Rihal presents the Christian position at the apex of its theological maturity:

"However at the close of their history, in the last generation of the Jewish people, God become corporeal and transformed into a fetus in the body of a virgin from a important Jewish family and she begot him.  Seemingly a person but secretly a God, seemingly a prophet, but secretly a God who dispatches prophets.  He is the Messiah, whom we call the son of God, and he is the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.  And behold, we are truly monotheists, although we speak of the trinity." (1:4)

            (Incidentally, fear of the Christian censors impelled the classic Warsaw edition to eliminate important sections of Rihal's text.  In order to further disguise the section's purpose, the Christian was called 'the Persian.')

            Rihal expressed the opinion of Jewish Sages throughout history when he placed the following response in the Kuzari's mouth:

"Such a religion does not leave room for logic.  Even more so - Logic repels most of your words." (1:5)

            Since the days of Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon, Jewish thought has maintained that religion is built upon reason, but not upon its ruins, as Christianity actively prescribes.  Reason is a filter that we must use.  It holds the power of veto, although it cannot assist us in actively verifying the truth.

            How did Rihal arrive at this position?  During the debate with the philosopher in the first section, we were given ample proof that logical difficulties with his own position did not distress Rihal at all.  This fact reemerges at a later stage.  In essence, Rihal is teaching us that two guides lead us on our existential quest: intellect and experience.  An experiment in physics can compel us to discard an opinion which we thought was necessitated by common sense:

"After a fact has been proven to a man through what he has witnessed and through his experience, such that he believes in it with all his heart, and cannot find any other option other than the belief in this fact, he will find some weak pretense, which opposes logical reasoning, in order to justify his unlikely belief.  This is also the course chosen by scientists when they uncover wondrous forces for the first time, forces which, had they been described to these scientists before they witnessed them with their own eyes, they would have denied their existence.  However, after witnessing [these forces], they craftily found a reason for them ... and they will not negate that which they saw with their own eyes."

            However, this is not the case with Christianity: "I do not find my mind able to accept these things as true."

 (This lecture was translated by Gila Weinberg.)