

6. PRECEPTS AND VALUES

Judaism is so different from other religions that it can hardly be defined as a religion in the usual sense of the word, especially because of its character, which is succinctly expressed in the Fathers' Maxims (*Pirqè Avot*) in five Hebrew words: "*Lo hamid-rash 'iqqar ellà ha-ma'asè*", which can be explained as follows: "What counts is not theoretical research, not philosophical or scholarly treatises, but action, the translation into concrete deeds of the principles to which one is supposed to adhere".

Although Judaism is based on assumptions of faith - such as the existence and omnipotence of God and the divine origin of the Torah - none of its classical texts (Bible, *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, ancient ritualists) impose them as dogmas to be accepted uncritically, but rather as elements to which the individual must be led through education based above all on the practice of the commandments (*mitzvot*).

The Jew's actions are focused on this world, and although it is an accepted idea in Jewish tradition that there is a hereafter in which individuals will be rewarded according to their actions, the Jew must not see the ultimate goal of his actions as enjoyment in the hereafter, but *living a righteous life* on this earth, enjoying life as a divine gift.

Jews are required to observe 613 commandments (*mišvot*): 365 prohibitions and 248 obligations. These numbers refer to the human condition: 365 as many as the days of the year, and 248 as many as the parts of the human body. Every moment and every part of the body is therefore directed towards observing the commandments.

But why observe the commandments? Perhaps for social or hygienic reasons, or to submit to an authority and thus avoid the burden of responsibility for one's actions? To follow the commandments solely for practical reasons (the social usefulness of the Sabbath, the hygienic value of the food rules, etc.) would be to reduce the rules commanded by God to merely human rules and to glorify godless autonomous behaviour, to the point of adapting them to petty convenience. But neither is it necessary to follow the rules of tradition in response to the command of a superior power to obey blindly, silencing our instincts, needs and desires. Rather, acceptance of the commandments is the consequence of a covenant with the Lord in which one has accepted an original principle, a higher order, that of *qedushah* (holiness as *distinction*), based on God's command (see for example Lev. 11,44-45: "*For I am the Lord your God, and you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, because I am holy, and you shall not defile yourselves through any creeping creature that crawls on the ground. For I am the Lord Who has brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God. Thus, you shall be holy, because I am holy*" and Lev. 19,1-2: "*And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the entire congregation of the children of Israel, and say to*

them, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.”

This is what the imitation of God consists in: the free acceptance of the commandments and their observance for the express and sole purpose of being distinct and consecrating every act of our day. It follows that for the Jew, studying, interacting with teachers, working for the good of the community are all ways of renewing the relationship with God every day.

In this sense, study is the primary tool of Jewish education, which has the dual purpose of acquiring knowledge of the *Torah* and its commandments, and at the same time of disseminating what has been learned, so that knowledge is not the privilege of a few, and so that through general education one grows in respect. The imperative contained in the *Shema* (Deut. 6:7 and 11:19) to repeat and teach all the commandments is followed in both passages by the expression “and you shall talk to them about it” (*vedibarta bam*), which emphasizes mnemonic teaching (repeating to remember), characterized by dialogue, in order to provide children with instruction that is open to questioning.

Thus, what is transmitted is not only information and notions, but also tools for understanding that are provided through dialogue, stimulating the autonomous elaboration of what is transmitted. Jewish education is thus based on discourse, a starting point and a stimulus to the search for new meanings.

Judaism also places great emphasis on social justice and solidarity, values that play an extremely important role. Like most commandments, those of solidarity are not reduced to mere moral advice, but are actualized into norms that prescribe with great precision the behaviours to be followed.

Judaism teaches how to behave in this world: many themes have developed in the tradition, such as respect for the elderly, sensitivity to suffering, love of nature, hospitality, advocacy for social justice, protection of the helpless, aversion to discrimination and racism, support for bereaved families, and care for the sick, elderly, and needy.

When the *Torah* attempts to teach the duty of solidarity with those who are oppressed in society, it recalls the similar situation experienced by the Jews during slavery in Egypt. The most vulnerable individuals in Jewish society mentioned in the Bible are foreigners, orphans, and widows because they lack family support or those who will intercede on their behalf.

Helping those in need is not an act of pity, but rather a legal obligation, an act of justice (*tzedaqah*), regardless of how much love or sympathy we feel for the people who are the recipients of our help. The *Torah* states our obligation to be charitable and to help even our enemies.

The set of commandments (*mišwot*) is thus intended to make Israel the chosen people, not in the sense of having special privileges, but on the contrary, a people with much heavier duties and responsibilities than others, to constitute a model society in which the ideas of equality and brotherhood of all people, justice and love are translated into concrete acts of everyday life.

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