A RESPONSE TO

Liturgy in the Light of Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Considering the Other's Tikkun

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The best language in which to to say something comprehensively without losing depth is in the Hebrew holy tongue, which is also the holy language of Jesus and thus the language of the father-son relationship, holy of holiest for Christians *(kodesh ha-kodashim)*. I will sum up my response with one Hebrew word, one we all just learned or re-learned: *Aleinu.* This needs to be explained.

Aleinu is the name and the first word of the prayer we heard about. Its translation is: "It is our duty". Or, as we might say at this conference on re-commitment in Berlin: "It is our commitment." Literally the word *aleinu* means: "on us" [in German "An uns ist es"; "An uns liegt es"]. In present-day colloquial Hebrew the word is mostly used in the context of hospitality, as for instance, "We'll take care of the bill; we'll treat you."

My Christian response to the Jewish transformations of the *Aleinu* prayer can be summed up in the Hebrew word *aleinu* [it is our duty—it is incumbent upon us) because I see the transformation of this prayer not just as a friendly ecumenical move that makes me lean back contentedly, but first and foremost as something that commits Christians. The changes that Jews are presently making in their liturgy reflect new perceptions about praying non-Jews. The decision to skip the sentence that depicts Others as adoring nothingness was not made with regard to Christians alone, but to Christians it is a highly relevant, indeed an essential, decision.

As we heard in Professor Langer's presentation, Jews are "repairing" this prayer in different modes, and I will again use only one term for all the different modes of repairing: *Tikkun*. Tikkun literally means repairing, and in contemporary Jewish thought Tikkun brings together various endeavors of healing relationships and creation. In our context, in liturgical memory, I suggest that we understand Tikkun as any change or reparation that seeks recognition of the Other (in the Levinasian sense)[1] while at the same time avoiding forgetfulness.

As a Christian my spontaneous reaction to the Jewish Tikkun is a certain feeling of gratitude. I do feel much better when this sentence is skipped in synagogue. This is the case in the conservative synagogue I go to: the sentence is there in the prayer book, but is not said. This is remarkable: The whole congregation unanimously skips it! For me, as a Christian visitor of the prayer service, this feels good. But my main thesis is that the repairing Jews perform here

[1] While the concept of *otherness* can be applied to various contexts, in the Levinasian understanding it cannot be employed to state one's own superiority, but only with regard to the priority of the Other. Not my own otherness, but the Other's otherness is my responsibility—which for example excludes the claim by Christians that belief in Jesus Christ as universal savior constitutes their Christian otherness. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Duquesne University Press: Pittsburgh, 1981.

commits me to justify this particular change. In abstract terms: the first function of the Other's Tikkun is to commit me. It is now our duty to live up to the repair; it is on us, *aleinu*. So, what does it mean here, for Christians, to live up to this Jewish Tikkun?

Let us go back to the text and its most controversial sentence, which can still be found in many prayer books (or can again be found, re-inserted after centuries of enforced Christian censorship). The advantage of keeping the sentence but not saying it is that it can help us remember the past of Christian violence that is echoed in it. "For they bow down to emptiness and nothingness (*hevel ve-rek*) and pray to a god who will not save." The Christian aggression itself is not documented in this sentence; we do not hear about place, time and the structure of violence from the liturgy itself. Historical research informs us that Christian violence is in the background —and maybe only in the background of interpretation. The sentence itself expresses a theological protest: forced baptism of Jews cannot be done in the name of the God of Israel.

The Jewish perception of a non-idolatrous Christianity today makes it possible to skip this sentence. According to the hermeneutics of the Other's Tikkun that I wish to develop here, Christians will have to take care that they not fall back into idolatry. One might say that Christians praying to idols is not one of our burning problems today. But recently there has been a resurgence of violence in Christian thought and a renewed desire on the part of some Christians to assimilate Jews to Christian belief, at least in principle. (This has been a striking theme in recent German public discourse). I used to think that we Christians had overcome the idea that Jews need us for salvation, and I thought that what was true before the Shoah was now acknowledged by the majority of Christians. I had assumed that what Franz Rosenzweig wrote in the twenties had become widely accepted today. When Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "I am the way, the truth and the life; nobody comes to the father except through me," Rosenzweig would enter into the Christian logic for a moment, confirm it, but then add: except for the one who already is with the Father and thus does not need to come there—which is the case for the people Israel.[2]

The Christian wish that Jews take a Christian truth on themselves induces doubts regarding the identity of the God that Christians pray to. If the God of Abraham and Sarah is the Father of Jesus Christ, if God lives in the continuity of both testaments, then the idea of turning Jews toward this God (to improve their relationship with this God from outside of this relationship) is a theo-logical mistake: a logical error concerning God. Whenever Christians fall back into the idolatry of the missionary desire, be it in practice or in theory, perhaps we should all pray, "for they bow down to emptiness and nothingness and pray to a god who will not save." For this puts Christian salvation into question.

It is true that we have many problems in our world today apart from missionary efforts. But also in the global Tikkun and the common struggle for world justice and peace every religion needs to contribute by repairing its particular structures of aggression. Wanting the Other to be like me is the specific Christian manner of aggression, as Daniel Boyarin has pointed out, and Christians need to be aware of this.[3] *Aleinu*, it is our Christian duty to fight this aggression and we are reminded of it twice in the twelve points of Berlin (*paamaim ki ra*!).[4]

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[2] Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig. His Life and Thought*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1998, p. 341.

[3] Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity,* University of California Press: Berkeley 1997, p.233.

[4] ICCJ, *The Twelve Points of Berlin. A Time for Recommitment,* http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=3104 .

Christian theologians have started to develop a Christian language against this idolatry: they call Jewish otherness a 'sacrament' (Cardinal Kasper and Phil Cunningham)[5] and see the otherness of the Other under God's special protection (Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt)[6]. This way is to be continued for the sake of the Other and for our own sake, to prevent Christian idolatry.

That a negative memory, or the theological echo of traumatic memories, can be skipped by Jews reflects a profoundly new situation between Jews and Christians. This is a church-historical moment of "credit" which we must not forego.

With regard to the Shoah, we find ourselves in an entirely different situation. The Shoah is not present yet in our daily or weekly liturgies. Even in the liturgical year, it has not yet been decided if this memory should be added to Tisha be'Aw or be remembered in a special prayer and Megila-reading on Yom ha-Shoah. Christians have lately assembled in memory of the Shoah on January 27, after a long tradition of marking November 9. The Shoah-Megila is a first attempt to define certain readings for remembrance.[7] I agree that we need to act liturgically, as there are fewer and fewer survivors among us to tell the story—and also because secular liturgies and cults develop that are not as thoughtful as we might wish.

Ruth Langer suggests that we consider Christian repentance in the formulation of specific Jewish memorial liturgy. How exactly that will look I cannot yet imagine. I would even say that it sounds utopian to me. But the memories of different parties need not be mixed. Families of survivors and grandchildren of Nazis, for instance, do not have to share their gestures and words of remembrance. At the same time new horizons open when we recognize that descendants of perpetrators and bystanders have begun a memory-process—a process of repentance in deeds and thought. Again, in my hermeneutics of *Aleinu,* this would not look like cheap memory (cheap forgiveness), and would not foster a premature recognition. It would not necessitate a Jewish recognition of Christian repentance, but rather the possibility of recognizing a beginning of *Tshuva*.

The ethics of memory as suggested by Avishai Margalit have limited us to the alternatives of either your own memory or global memory, either the history of your own group or events of universal importance.[8] It is an entirely new challenge to formulate one's own memory in solidarity with or criticism of one's own group, and leave liturgical space for the ongoing memory-process of the Other. The repairing of a tradition in consideration of the Other is not flattening one's own identity, and it is not a sign of "low-profile" theology. Rather, the view of the Other as a developing religious subject who undergoes pains and changes underlines the challenge of one's own liturgical presence. Thus any expression of the Other's transformations of memory vitalizes one's own prayer, song and devotion.

"Aleinu" as the described hermeneutic of the Other's Tikkun in the Jewish-Christian relationship offers an alternative to interreligious reductionism and to the reinforcement of the conservative values of each. Rather than exercising a political-theological correctness, considering the Other's past and present Tikkun encourages a dynamic of commitment and re-commitment. A liturgy that expresses awareness of the Other's repairing vitality will intensify its own spirituality and observance.

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[5] Cf. Philip A. Cunningham, "Judaism as 'Sacrament of Otherness.'" http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=2189 .

[6] Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Was dürfen wir hoffen, wenn wir hoffen dürften? Eine Eschatologie, Vol. I*, Kaiser Gütersloher Verlagshaus: Gütersloh 1993, pp. 183-192.

[7] The Shoah Scroll. A Holocaust Liturgy, Schechter Institute / The Rabbinical Assembly, Jerusalem 2003.

[8] Avishai Margalit, Ethics of Memory, Harvard University Press, 2002.