

Outside the Synagogue, no Salvation?

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Outside the Churchí

Within Judaism, is there a concept equivalent to the famous maxim "Outside the Church, there is no salvation"?¹ For the purposes of comparison, it will suffice merely to present the basic Christian texts relating to the salvation of non-Christians. The idea itself is rooted in the Gospel of Mark (16:16), which states that only those who are both believers and baptized will be saved. This concept was reiterated subsequently in various ecclesiastical texts. In 1212, for example, the Fourth Lateran Council expressly declared that there is one sole universal Church, outside of which no person will be saved. But it was in 1439 at the highly magisterial Council of Florence that the virulence of this concept that no salvation was possible outside the Church reached its fullest flower:

The very holy Roman church fervently believes, professes and preaches that none who live outside the Catholic Church can ever hope to acquire eternal life, and that this includes not solely pagans, but also Jews, heretics and schismatics as well. Such people will go (i.e., when they die) directly to the eternal flames created for the devil and his emissaries (Matthew 25:41).²

If, in the course of subsequent history, the threat of being excluded from salvation was used more and more frequently to subdue (and even to justify excommunicating) different groups of heretics and schismatics within the Church and less often to exclude groups that had never been the target of Christian evangelization in the first place, the Jews were targeted with this specific threat from the very outset as a result of their deliberate refusal to acknowledge the salvific mission of Jesus and his innate divinity.³ Indeed, it would not be until 1949, fully half a millennium after the Council of Florence, that the Pope, Pius XII, condemned the strict interpretation of the phrase "Outside the Churchí" At the Second Vatican Council (cf. the document *Lumen Gentium* §16), the conception of this maxim was somewhat nuanced in a good way. However, the last official version of *Catechism of the Catholic Church* specifies that "this affirmation does not target those who, *through no fault of their own*, are ignorant of Christ and his Church" (*Catéchisme de l'Église catholique*, Paris, Mame/Plon, 1992, p. 186).

The ambiguity of this statement reveals certain awkwardness in regards to the legitimacy of other spiritualities. Jewish representatives will still have something to debate with Catholic representatives over what is to be understood by the phrase "through no fault of their own" and over the ambition to evangelize, which is still present and difficult to ignore: "The Church has the duty and the sacred right to evangelize all men" (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, above and beyond the missionary motive, we should understand the generous intention that underlies the concern for bringing salvation to all humanity without *a priori* discrimination.

On the duty to convert

In Judaism, is there a right or a duty of "Judaisation" in regards to non-Jews? Does the possibility of salvation exist outside of complete conversion to its doctrine? In order to respond appropriately on both a historical and doctrinal level, it is first necessary to free ourselves from certain commonplaces. As such, it is commonly said that Judaism is not a proselytizing religion,

either today or in the past, but that it recognizes a form of universal religiosity bringing salvation to those who apply what is defined in the Talmud as the "seven commandments of Noah." This assertion, which as a whole is well-founded, nonetheless merits being re-evaluated as its apologetic discourse attenuates a good part of the issue. We know, for example, that Judaism had intense and even prolonged periods of proselytism, albeit no systematic missionary activism. In the Roman empire of the first two centuries C.E., numerous people either became Jewish, or considered themselves "God fearing" – that is to say, that without having converted to Judaism they had interiorized a certain number of beliefs and rites of the Synagogue. The effort to propagate the Jewish message seems to have effectively faded away when Christianity was imposed in the West.⁴ All this occurred as if, after very pronounced tensions in the rivalry and resentment that opposed Jews and Christians, there were, if not an official divorce, at least a sort of tacit understanding in regards to the division of their respective vocations: the Jews closed in upon themselves, putting off universalism for the messianic period; the Christians detached themselves from their Jewish foundations in order to fully commit themselves to the conversion of pagans, thus putting off the conversion of Jews to eschatology. The manner in which contemporary Judaism positions itself in relation to the universal is in large part still conditioned by this rupture and this retreat. Such is the case not only in examining History in the broadest sense but also in examining *Halachah*, Jewish law, which defines the conditions of so-called universal religion and which we will here attempt to outline.

On forced conversion

Maimonides (1138-1204 C.E.) is the principal if not almost the sole decision-maker that committed himself to systematically defining the status of religious ethics that were universally operative from the point of view of Judaism (cf. *Hil. melachim* 9). He is so convinced of the necessity of such a universal code, both for good social order as well as human salvation, that he does not hesitate to consider it a pressing duty to "convert" by force – under penalty of death – those who fall under the political authority of Israel by conquest:

No peace should be concluded with a foreign city as long as its inhabitants have not renounced idolatry, destroyed all idols and accepted the other commandments of Noah. Failing this, we are obligated to kill all those who fall under our authority. Moses transmitted the Torah and its commandments to the people of Israel, as it is written "as a heritage for the community of Jacob" (*Dt* 33:4) but also to every person among the nations that wishes to convert to Judaism, as it is written "for the foreigner as for you" (*Nb* 15:15). But the person who does not wish it should not be forced. Nonetheless, Moses received the injunction to impose upon all people the duty of fulfilling the commandments given to the descendants of Noah. Any person who would refuse to do so must be put to death. But whomever submits to this will be considered a *ger toshav* (foreigner residing rightfully among the Jews in the land of Israel) wherever he may be found. (*Hil. melachim* 8:9-10).⁵

Apart from the problem that the violence of forced conversions clearly poses to the modern conscience, it is necessary to point out here a double attitude within the principal defining this duty in relation to the universal: the commitment to *becoming Jewish* must not be imposed in any case – although it may be commendable, or even desirable – but a commitment to *morality* must be. The "conversion" to universal religion is here considered not as incorporation into the specific codes of Judaism but as the minimum of humanity, of acceptable civic life.

The seven commandments of Noah

What does this universal law consist of? Maimonides considered that it had been instituted since Adam, the first man, and included six commandments: the prohibitions on idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery and theft, as well as the duty to institute a system of courts/justice. Noah would have then received a seventh commandment: the prohibition on consuming any part of a still-living animal (blood), on the basis of the verse of *Gn 9:4* (*ibid.* 9:1, *Gn rabba* 34:13). For the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 56a; *Tosefta avoda zara* 8:4) and the related literature, it is more generally a question of the seven commandments of Noah, which are valid for all of humanity. Their number and their exact identification have been the subject of debate and disagreement, but in the end, they have been defined as above. The oldest source to attest to such an ordering is found in the apocryphal work, the *Book of Jubilees* (7:20), which dates from the third century B.C.E.:

Noah prescribed the following to his children: to accomplish justice, to cover (modestly) their flesh, to bless the Creator, to honor father and mother, to love one's neighbor, to refrain from debauchery, impurity and violence.

The character of these precepts reflects a sort of *lex naturalis*, a universal ethic that the conscience may attain without it being necessary to rely upon a Revelation, the role of the latter limiting itself to conferring upon them the character of an absolute imperative. The seven commandments of Noah defined in the Talmud are not rigorously identical to those articulated in this version but their close relation is evident. Since the Talmudic period, rabbinic literature has confirmed this character of rational religion by locating identical commandments in the Torah:

You shall accomplish my commandments: these are the words inscribed in the Torah that, if they hadn't been written, would have deserved to be. These are the prohibition of theft, debauchery, idolatry, blasphemy and murder (*Sifra, Aharei mot* 9:13).

For the rabbis of the Talmud and their successors,⁶ the 613 commandments of the Torah revealed to Israel are perceived as an extension, the complement of the seven universal commandments which are incumbent upon Israel, as the following text attests:

Before receiving the Torah on Mont Sinai, the children of Israel received ten commandments at Mara: the seven that Noah's children had already received, to which were added the laws of justice, the observance of Shabbat and respect for one's parents (*Sanhedrin* 56b, cf. also *Midrash Seder olam* § 5, *Yalkut Shimoni, Be-shalah* 257).

Between duty and inclination

Concerning the merit of accomplishing these commandments, there is however a noted difference between Israel and the other nations. According to a famous Talmudic *midrash* (*Avoda zara* 2b-3a), the fact of other nations having taken on the seven commandments is judged as a whole as being problematic:

The Holy one, blessed be he, will ask the other nations (at the Final Judgement): You (who accuse Israel of laxity) have you only observed the seven commandments of Noah? How does one know that they [the nations] don't submit to them? ô Rav Yosef takes from the verse: ôGod rises, measures what

happens on earth; He observes and releases the nationsö (*Habakuk* 3:6). ó What did God observe? ô That the sons of Noah did not apply the seven commandments and from this fact, He released them [from them]. ó Would God have exempted them [from performing them]? Is it not absurd to compensate the offender?! ó Mar, son of Ravina, specifies that rather than an exemption, the release signifies that even if they [the nations] applied the seven commandments, they would not receive the (spiritual) reward for them. ó But, one objects, does not Rabbi Meir teach that ôeven a non-Jew who studies the Torah is comparable (in merit) to the grand priestö? [í] ó Indeed, this remark should lead to a modification of Marø's suggestion that will then mean that the Gentiles will not receive their retribution as persons invested with duties, but only as persons acting on their own initiative, as is understood by the principle pronounced by Rabbi Hanina: He who accomplishes good, considering it his duty, is greater than he who accomplishes good by reason of his own judgment⁷

According to this text, there does exist a merit worthy of reward for the righteous among the nations, when they act on their own initiative ó that is to say, without referring to a duty that has been revealed to them ó but this compensation would not in any case be as high as that of Israel that is committed to the commandments of the Torah.

Some have believed themselves able, on the basis of this distinction, to establish two degrees of virtue sanctioned by precise terms: *hasid* would then designate one who acts out of a simple spirit of generosity and *tzaddik* one who acts out of a conscious duty. Non-Jews could achieve only the former, while Jews the latter, or even a combination of the two. Yet it is important to show that this kind of semantic reduction is neither justified on a terminological level, nor above all on a doctrinal level, as the sources remain contradictory in this regard. According to a rabbinic teaching, it is possible for a person to raise themselves to the status of *õtzaaddikö* (a righteous person) without necessarily being Jewish and consequently to be loved by God on the same level as the righteous of Israel:

If a person wishes to be *tzaddik*, even if he is not Jewish, he can. [í] He counts among those ôfearing Godö who, not by virtue of their *origin* but by virtue of their *initiative*, love the Holy One, blessed be he. This is why the Holy One, blessed be he, loves them (*Nb rabba* 8:2).

Here, no privilege is established on the basis of national or community origin. This text, however, suffers from a certain ambiguity: if the ôGod fearersö are clearly, in the biblical context that is cited, non-Jews praising God, the rest of the *midrash* can lead one to believe that that only concerns the non-Jews who join themselves to Israel as *gerei tzedek* (converts). If this is the case, the status of *tzaddik* would then only be acquired through conversion. But another text contradicts such a generalization:

How to interpret the verse ôMay Your priests be dressed in the garments of justice!ö (*Ps* 132:9)? ôYour priestsöô these are the righteous among the peoples of the world (*tsadike umot ha-olam*), because they are priests for God in this world (*Yalkut Shimoni*, II, 2:429; *Otsar midrashim*, ed. Eisenstein, p. 486).

The affirmation of an impartial retribution, without regard to the quality of the person, is likewise supported by a *midrash*:

The Holy One, blessed be he, said to Moses: Jew or non-Jew, man or woman, slave, servant (or not) ô no partiality. The person who fulfills a precept will be rewarded (*Eliyahu rabba*, ed. Ish-Shalom, § 14).

If one were to object, as some have, that the recompense in question concerns only the present world, it is useful to refer to the Tannaitic source (2nd century) that has been the subject of more

broad debate. Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua are in opposition in regards to the salvation of non-Jews. The former does not give them a place in the world to come, while the latter does:

Rabbi Eliezer says: non-Jews will not have a place in the world to come, as it is written: ׀Let the evil-doers be sent to the Sheol, all peoples who are forgetful of God׀ (*Ps* 9:16). ׀Let the evil-doers be sent to the Sheol׀ means the evil-doers of Israel; ׀all peoples who are forgetful of God׀ these are all peoples, all considered as evil-doers. But Rabbi Yehoshua responded: If the formulation of the verse had been ׀Let the evil-doers be sent to the Sheol, all peoples and nothing more, I would be of your opinion. But since the verse specifies ׀forgetful of God,׀ I deduce that there must be some righteous (*tsadikim*) among the nations that have a place in the world to come [for they are not forgetful of God]. (*Tosefta, Sanhedrin* 13:2; *Sanhedrin* 105a).

Maimonides (*Hil. teshuva* 3:5) decided the debate by siding with Rabbi Yehoshua and was followed by the majority, such that it is now recognized more or less unanimously that salvation is, in principal, accessible to every person without the necessity of converting to Judaism.⁸ This assertion must nonetheless be nuanced somewhat. It is appropriate to examine what must be considered the source that could have influenced Maimonides in regards to this question, that is, the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* (8th century):⁹

The difference between the *hasidei Israel* and the *hasidei umot ha-olam*¹⁰ is based on the fact that the first are only recognized as such when they have accomplished the entire Torah, while the second are [considered such] from the moment they have fulfilled the seven commandments of Noah in their diverse applications. This is said on the condition that they recognize that this obligation comes to them from Noah *on the basis of divine Revelation*. If this is the case, they have a place in the world to come *like Israel*, and this is so even if they do not apply certain rules such as the observance of Shabbat and of festivals, because they have not received the injunction. If however they apply the seven commandments solely on the basis of the recommendations of an individual, *upon their own analysis* or on what they judge to be reasonable or, further, if they associate the name of an idol to their worship even if they were to apply the Torah in its entirety, they would only receive the reward for their deeds in the present world.

This text brings to light that the future reward promised to the *hasidei umot ha-olam* is equivalent to that of *hasidei Israel*. Moreover, they enjoy it, one might say, at a lesser cost since Jews must fulfill more obligations to achieve the same result. On the other hand, the specified conditions limit this justification of salvation to the frame of an explicit recognition of the revelation made to Noah as the basis of their ethics. Outside of this recognition, there is no salvation—other than a certain recompense in this world. Here, then, is traced the inverse schema from the one suggested above in the Talmud (*Avoda zara* 2b-3a), which stated that a reward exists for the righteous among the nations that act in the service of the good without reference to a duty that would have been revealed to them, although this reward can not be as high as that for Israel observing the commandments of the Torah.

We should note at this point that according to the rabbinic hermeneutics, it is well justified to prefer a Talmudic opinion to any other later text that does not have the same authority; just as it is possible to harmonize the points of view by considering that the merit of righteous non-Jews would be identical to that of righteous Jews if they accomplish good by virtue of a conscious duty that was revealed to them, and less merit if it is only a subjective choice. Whatever the cause, in this last text, a new subtlety is introduced that can offend modern consciousness. Is not to say that to spontaneously accomplish the demands of *lex naturalis* can only lead to a limited happiness in the present world to exclude from salvation the crushing majority of humanity? Spinoza fought

against this very position that he attributes to Jewish misanthropy (cf. *Theologico-Political Treatise*, chap. 5). He had encountered this text of Maimonides:

Every person who accepts the authority of the seven commandments of Noah and applies oneself to their observance should be considered one of the *hasidei umot ha-olam*, having a place in the world to come. On the condition, however, that one accepts and applies them in considering that God had prescribed them in the Torah given to Moses, or rather that they had been commanded to the children of Noah. But if the person accomplishes these acts by virtue of their sole judgment, he cannot be considered as a *ger toshav*, nor as a part of the *hasidei umot ha-olam*, nor even [Yemenite version considered to be authentic: but only]¹¹ counted in the ranks of the Wise of the nations. (*Hil. melachim* 8:11).

Spinoza's critique is a forerunner of the *Aufklärung*, of the idea that the great values inherent to the human spirit have a tendency to be respected without the spur of religion, or even to be better respected in that case. It has been shown above that the Talmudic sources already translated the awareness of a "natural" moral law not tied to the belief in Revelation. Why do rabbis such as Maimonides then judge it necessary to refer to the Revelation in respecting this morality? Certainly, because they did not trust reason alone to insure the absolute foundation of values. Certainly, because in the eyes of medieval rabbis only the transcendent basis of morality contained in the biblical Revelation of the one God could serve as the solid basis for the unification of humankind. Certainly, as well, because only the reference to the commandments of Noah pronounced in the Torah allowed the necessary articulation of the universalist vocation of Israel as a "sacred nation and kingdom of priests."

On the Salvation of the nations

In light of these considerations, it is easier to discern the two contradictory tendencies that developed in rabbinic thought without the question ever having been decided by a unanimously recognized authority: for those on the one side, non-Jews did not want to bind themselves to the seven commandments of Noah and did not recognize the authority of the Torah, and consequently could not reach Salvation, with the exception of rare individuals, the righteous among the nations; for those on the other side, the non-Jews described in the ancient rabbinic literature as deprived of Salvation were morally corrupt pagans. **But at the same time, they thought that** a rather severe judgment could not be applied to the contemporary civilizations which surrounded them.

To illustrate these two points of view, here are several significant examples gleaned from a vast literature. In the first group, it is worth including a preamble to the morning prayer that appears in Sephard and Sephardic rites (but not in Ashkenazic):

Is the condition of humans more enviable than that of animals when all is but fleeting vanity? Only the neshama (soul attached to Israel) is pure and will one day be called to account before Your throne of glory. While all other nations are as nothing before you, as it is written: ׀The nations are but a drop in a bucket, reckoned as dust on a balance; the very coastlands He lifts like motes׀ (*Jes* 40:15). But we are Your people!

The absence of this strophe in prayers book before the 15th century leads one to think that it is a case of a post-medieval interpolation. But the idea itself, the denigration of any spiritual value of the nations, is ancient (cf. above, *Tosefta, Sanhedrin* 13:2). It is subsequently echoed in later

authors. Thus, one can read in a virulent *midrash* of the *Alphabet (Otiot) of Rabbi Akiba* (7th-9th c., in *Otsar midrashim*, ed. Eisenstein, p. 407):

Where do we learn that the prince of Gehenna every day demands that food be brought to him to appease his appetite? From the verse: *“Assuredly, Sheol has opened wide its gullet and parted its jaws in a measureless gape; and down into it shall go, that splendor and tumult, that din and revelry (Jes 5:14).* *ó* What does *“measureless”* mean? *ó* It is a question of the nations of the world for whom Gehenna opens a gaping mouth because they refused the Torah and did not fulfill the commandments in this world, as it is written: *“All nations are as naught in His sight (Jes 40:17),* which is why they will be sent to the fires of hell that will devour them in one mouthful, as it is written: *“Let the wicked be in Sheol, all the nations who ignore God! (Ps 9:18).*

As opposed to what the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* explicitly says about it (see above), here the nations are reproached for having rejected the Torah and for not observing its commandments. The accusation is founded on a *midrash* (*Avoda zara* 2b) in which God had offered the Torah to the nations but they had refused it.¹² But also, in another Talmudic passage describing the fact that the Torah was put at the disposition of the nations *ó* because it had been inscribed on the stones situated at the border of the land of Israel (cf. *Dt 27:8; Jes 4:9*) *ó* but they did not take advantage of it:

Rabbi Yehuda teaches that the nations delegated scribes to scrape the lime and copy the words of the Torah that were inscribed on the stones (under the lime); this is why their condemnation was to be plunged into the abyss of hell, for they should have studied it but did not. According to Rabbi Shimon, it was upon the lime itself that the words were inscribed and at the bottom was added (as an epigraph): *“lest they lead you into doing all the abhorrent things that they have done for their gods and you stand guilty before the Lord your God (Dt 20:18).* From that, he says, we learn that if the nations repent, they will be accepted. Rava bar Shila asked: Upon what source does Rabbi Shimon base his argument? *ó* On the verse: *“Peoples shall be burnings of lime (Jes 33:12),* from which he draws that their fate will be a consequence of the use that should have been made of the lime. And Rabbi Yehuda? He deduces that it will be as for lime, which is to say: just as lime cannot be repaired unless it is burned, the nations have no other reparation than fire [of hell] (*Sota* 35b. See *Tosefta, Sota* 8:6-7).

Damnation in hell seems all the more outrageous in that the continuation of the *midrash* cited above (*Avoda zara* 2b) recognizes that in the accomplishment of the commandments of Noah, there is a certain merit valid for Salvation, and that moreover, the study of the Torah by non-Jews was ultimately outlawed in the Talmud! (*Sanhedrin* 59a)¹³. How then can one hold it against them? The redactor of the *Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba* seems to have adopted the extremist point of view of Rabbi Eliezer in the *Tosefta* (cf. above), and of Rabbi Yehuda in the current Talmudic passage, and categorically rejected the others. Or else he subscribes to the no less radical thesis according to which only exceptional individuals can through their righteousness break from the lot of the nations, escaping perdition, while the majority runs to it inexorably.¹⁴ In any case, it is this idea which comes from a certain number of earlier texts such as those of the rabbi and philosopher, Isaac Arama (15th. c.):

“All nations are as naught in His sight (Jes 40:17); *ó*The nations are but a drop in a bucket, reckoned as dust on a balance (Jes 40:15). *ó* [Metaphor:] Like the isolated drop falling from the bucket falls back into the well at the moment it is drawn, while the collected water will serve for diverse uses such as watering animals, making cement or accomplishing any other function but will not return to their source, so too it will be for the honest persons among the nations that will have a right to eternal life. Indeed, those souls who return to the place they were drawn from are a minute number,

that is to say negligible, just as the drop released from the bucket that rejoins the abundant waters of the well. While those who are committed to dilution and running to their perdition are very numerous (*Akedat Itshak*, 6th Gate, *ve-alehem neemar*).

In certain sources of Kabbalistic inspiration, appreciations such as these are even further accentuated in as much as in them there even appears a distinction as to the level of heavenly bliss, a distinction which is however absent from the Talmudic sources.¹⁵ Thus we can read from the pen of Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzato (18th c.):

In the world to come, there will be no nation other than Israel! As to the (worthy) souls of the *hasideh umot ha-olam*, they will reach an auxiliary reality, annexed to that of Israel. They will only be attached to it as a piece of clothing is to a man. From this, they will enjoy whatever they are in a position to take in from the source of good. But it is not in their nature to access more than that (*Derech ha-Shem* 2:4).¹⁶

On the Salvation of Israel

Discrimination plays a role as well in the conditions of access to the world to come promised to the Jews, as they enjoy a certain advantage, not however without raising some reservations aimed at reducing accessibility. The source of the debate is none other than the *mishna* that presents the principle of the matter:

All of Israel has a place in the world to come, as it is written: "And Your people, all righteous, will inherit for all time the country, seed that I have planted, work of My hands, object of My glory" (*Jes* 60:21). But these are those who will not have a place in the world to come: he who affirms that the belief in the resurrection of the dead is not based in the Torah or that it is not of divine origin, the heretic, etc. (*Sanhedrin* 10:1).

This text was taken by Maimonides to indicate that every Jew will have a place in the world to come, including those whose sins exceed their merits, with the sole exception of those that have undermined the very foundations of Jewish faith or ethics and who have not repented:¹⁷

All those whose crimes surpass their good deeds will be judged according to their faults but will have a place in the world to come, and this *in spite of the fact that they have sinned*, as it is written: All of Israel has a place in the world to come, according to the verse: "And Your people, all the righteous, will inherit for all time this country." The country in question is no other than the world to come and thus, there will be *hasidei umot ha-olam* [those who have respected the seven commandments] who have a place in the world to come as well. (*Hil. teshuva* 3:5).

If this paragraph clearly associates the *hasideh umot ha-olam* with Salvation, the entirety of non-Jews does not enjoy the same relative immunity as does Israel.¹⁸ According to the *midrash* of the *Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba* (*op. cit.*), Jews must descend into hell to expiate their faults, escape from the flames and finish by being delivered, contrary to Gentiles:

As for the children of Israel, they will be thankful for the Torah when they see it standing before the Holy one, blessed be he, and imploring him for the fate of those of Israel who are sent to hell, so that they might be freed. God in effect will respond to it: My child, your beloved ones have certainly been thrown into the Gehenna, but this place has no hold on them as they will study the Torah day and night (to expiate their sins).

It is then the fact of having from the start a credit, that of being closely attached to the Torah, according to the Midrash, or at least of subscribing to the beliefs and fundamental practices of the community of Israel, according to Maimonides,¹⁹ that grants this "free pass" for the world to come. But the idea that Israel will enjoy a certain innate privilege created a certain discomfort. It is for this reason that certain teachers insisted in particular upon the fact that the identity of Israel should be confirmed existentially, or spiritually and morally, in order to justify Salvation. Thus, for Isaac Arama, it is necessary to merit the title of righteous in order to be eligible for the immortality of the soul and the only real advantage of belonging to Israel consists of the fact that the heritage of heavenly values is immediately accessible through the Torah:

As concerns this affirmation of our sages, "all of Israel has a place in the world to come," it is necessary to specify its meaning. For if it were a question of asserting that every Jewish person, whether on the level of a sage or rather that of evil-doers or the ignorant, is worthy of Salvation, that would be a profound wrong, as much to the former as regards the latter, as with a view to the other nations. That would be to saddle God with a disgraceful favoritism in privileging Israel for the sole fact that it is supposedly His servant, such that good people and bad would know the same fate, which cannot be pleasing to God. And if the intention was to say that every person who responds to the name of Israel is unmistakably destined to become just and consequently worthy of his place in the world, an examination of reality shows this to be false since among the Jews there can be found sinners of every kind. In fact, the sages cut short such assertions by listing in the same *mishna* those among the Jews that did not merit a place in the world to come. All this indicates that only the person who behaves righteously is worthy of bearing the name of Israel [that will have a place in the world to come]. It is as though it were a question of equivalent terms indicating that every Jew is necessarily a righteous person, as long as he correctly observes the prescriptions of the Torah. This is in essence to say that every authentically righteous person incarnates the identity of Israel such that the terms of "Israel" and "worthy" [of eternal Salvation] are interchangeable: *Every individual of Israel is worthy, and every worthy individual is of Israel.* [] As for those who will not have obeyed the injunctions of the Torah and will not have attempted to correct their nature and their temperament, they will have nothing of Israel but the name. In saying that «all of Israel has a place in the world to come,» the Sages designated the Jews that have lived in the proper rectitude. *One is only a Jew who behaves as a Jew* and such was the meaning of the prophet who said: "And Your people, all of them righteous" (*Jes* 60:21). They had in view those who made up this entity to the extent that those that are included are included by virtue of being righteous. [] The interest [of this promise] is for the masses of the assembly of Israel who are not capable of investigation for themselves but who can claim the right of their inheritance by taking advantage of it. It is indeed easier and more accessible to perfect oneself by following this well-traced path than to get there at the cost of a long and fastidious intellectual and spiritual process [] With the Torah, wisdom is within Israel's reach, as on a *laden table* [] (*Sefer Akedat Itzak*, ed. of Jerusalem, 1961, 60 th Gate, *ou-mi-taam z'ot*).

Muslims and Christians in relation to idolatry

Now we shall turn to the thinking of those of the second group for whom a much more circumspect judgment on the morality and spirituality of the nations was deemed a necessity. Numerous texts concerning the depraved conduct of non-Jews and the resulting behavior to adopt in relation to them were very quickly put in perspective in as much as the rabbis ruled that their contemporaries could no longer be considered vulgar idolaters. It is to Rabbi Yohanan (2nd c.) that the Talmud attributes the following opinion:

Non-Jews that live outside of the land of Israel should not be considered as though practicing idolatry, for they are merely reproducing rites by simple atavism. (*Hulin* 13b).²⁰

Maimonides (12th c.) expresses an opinion that is much more positive in relation to Muslims, at least concerning their beliefs, and in this regard he was followed by the majority of decision-makers:

The Ishmaelites do not practice idolatry in any fashion. [Idolatry] has long been eradicated from their mouths and their hearts and they have a conception of the unity of God, blessed be he, which is absolutely in compliance, without the slightest defect (Epistle to Ovadia, the convert, *Responsa of Maimonides*, ed. Fryman, ref. 369, pp.335-337).

On the other hand, when it is a question of Christianity, Maimonides classes it categorically as idolatry. He writes in his *Commentary* in the *Mishna*:

Be it known that Christians that claim the messianic status of Jesus, whatever their school may be, are all idolaters. It is forbidden to mix with them on Sunday, as the Talmudic rule dictates as regards the festival days of idolaters. (*Avoda zara* 1:1-3).²¹

Rabbi Tuvia Friedman²² (1908-1992) indicates however in this regard:

If certain decision-makers followed Maimonides in his radically negative judgment on Christianity, this was not the case of a very large number that had a decisive influence on the future of *Halachah*. From the time of the Middle Ages, the two following considerations were highlighted: the fact that idolatrous sects, in the strict sense, had disappeared long before in Europe and that certain acts, or absence of acts, present in contemporary non-Jewish communities distinguished them clearly from the idolaters of the past. The Tossafists were among the first to put things in this perspective in the Talmud. Thus, Rabenu Tam is cited on the subject of the prohibition upon mentioning the names of idols (cf. *Ex* 23:13): ׀In our time, non-Jews prey to their Saints without however divinizing them; and doing so, they invoke the name of God, while referring to another (Jesus), it is not however the name of an idol and, nonetheless, their intention is to address the Creator of heaven and earth. And even if the name of God is then *associated* to another [name], they cannot be considered as transgressing such a prohibition,²³ as a consequence of which, there is no justification for saying that we provoke [when we point to their prayer] the transgression ׀And do not set an obstacle in front of a blind man.øIndeed, the Noachids did not receive any injunction on this point.ö²⁴ (*Tiføeret Israel*, 21:3).

The most radical conceptual revolution was without a doubt that of the great French commentator of the Talmud, R. Menachem Ha-Meiri (13th c.). He forged a new category to designate non-Jews of his time, granting them an eminently positive religious status: he called them *øumot ha-gdurot be-darke ha-dat*: nations endowed with a religious code of conductø:

Even in respect to idolaters that do not respect the ethical laws of religion, it is forbidden to practice theft [í], to not repay agreed-upon debts [í]. However, in the case of an accounting error in a transaction or a lost object, the law does not require restitution to an idolater (however, if the thing is known, it is necessary to repay the difference in order to avoid any profanation of the name of God). But concerning the people of *nations endowed with a religious code of conduct* that serve God in some way [like Muslims and Christians] ó even if their faith may be judged distant from our own ó they do not fall into this category [of idolaters]. This is why there is some reason to consider them *on the same level as the Israelites, without restriction*, for all questions considered, whether it concerns the obligation to return a lost object or to give back money in the case of an error in payment. It is the same for all other questions: the [moral] obligation must be applied *indifferently* [to the people of these nations as to the Jews] (*Beit ha-behira, Baba kama* 113b).

Important examples of medieval Spanish rabbis who move in this same direction abound, refusing to consider Christians as idolaters.²⁵ It is not until the *Shulhan Arukh* that this principle is reflected:

Some have said that all these prohibitions (relating to commerce) only concern that epoch and not our own, because they are not idolaters; this is why it is permitted to mingle with them on the day of their holidays, to lend them money and to participate in all kinds of activities (*Yoreh deah*, ref. 148:12).

Subsequently, ever more numerous decision-makers until the modern period have followed this tendency, so that it is by now broadly admitted that Muslims and Christians recognize at least indirectly the authority of the seven commandments of Noah, and consequently are counted among the "righteous of the nations", having a right to eternal life as long as they actually observe them²⁶.

Outside of religion, no salvation?

This situation nevertheless cannot be deemed satisfactory since it still requires the belief in the Revelation of the Torah for Salvation. Indeed, many of our contemporaries consider themselves simply theists, agnostic or even atheists, but nonetheless behave ethically. Are they all condemned to perdition? Moses Mendelssohn, in an epistolary exchange with Rabbi Jacob Emden, was indignant at such a proposition:

Will the inhabitants of the Earth, from where the sun rises to where it sets, with us as the sole exception, all descend into the abyss, becoming an object of horror for every living being under the sole pretext that they do not believe in the Torah, when it was only given to the tribe of Jacob?! (*Jubilee*, ed. *Des Schriften* by Mendelssohn, XVI, p.178).

In light of the present study, it seems that diverse factors are worthy of being taken into account by the authorities of contemporary Judaism, all able to broaden the Jewish conception of the "doors of Salvation" and thus to reinforce its universalism. To begin with, it is worth noting that the respect for the commandments of Noah, as it was required in the Talmud, does not require in any sort a belief in Revelation, or even in God! Nor is the adherence to the Revelation made to Noah or to Moses a condition of the validity of this observance, as the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* and later Maimonides subsequently make it. It is true that the prohibitions on idolatry and blasphemy imply a commitment of a metaphysical order, but it is above all a question of breaking with certain behaviors considered to be excessive. It is apparent that it is the ethical consequences tied to idolatry more than idolatry itself as a simple cult phenomenon that was the essential aim of rabbinic reprobation. The evidence is that the Talmud mentions non-Jewish individuals who have earned their place in the world to come through acts of bravery against evil, without having made any profession of faith (cf. above, note 15). Similarly, in a *midrash* attributed to the wisdom of Rabbi Eliezer, the *Pirkeh de-Rabbi Eliezer* (9th c.) the father of all humanity, Adam, declares:

It is good to give thanks to the Lord (*Ps* 92:2). The first man said: Let all future generations learn from me that whomsoever should recognize his faults and abandon them, will be saved from the verdict of the Gehenna, as it is written: It is good to give thanks [í]. And to announce your goodness in the morning (*ibid.*): this verse concerns all those in the world to come, that gather in the morning (*PRE* 18).

Besides certain exceptions like Maimonides, the rabbinic sources clearly show that the persistence of idolatrous practices was regarded as simple atavism, and that the association of a secondary divinity was not considered a fundamental threat to monotheism ó at least for what is required on the part of non-Jews ó in as much as religion constituted a basis of morality. This is particularly meaningful in the definition that Ha-Meiri gives of Christian and Muslim groups as ñations endowed with a religious code of conductö as opposed to ñidolatrous nations soiled by their acts and corrupted by sinö (*Beit ha-behira*, A. z. 22a, p.53).

Finally, it is necessary to add that since the time of the biblical prophets, the faith of Israel itself has been judged for the most part by the measure of moral conduct; this is even considered to be the necessary pre-condition for any religious practice. Contemporary rabbinic Judaism can continue to consider that monotheism ó even pure monotheism as it is professed through the Revelation of Israel ó constitutes the best metaphysical foundation to promote human solidarity. But it would be a grave mistake not to recognize the secular forms that modern religiosity can take. Certain individuals having no intuition or perception of the existence of God nonetheless submit their conscience to moral demands that they deem to be irrefutable, sometimes even the point of risking their lives. All this is to say that the metaphysical underpinnings of conduct, often obscure for skeptics, nonetheless rigorously order their action in the sense that they feel themselves profoundly indebted to moral principles that for the religious believer are fundamental. Such an attitude cannot be reduced to that of a person who acts according to what the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* calls ñif they only followed the recommendations of an individual, based on their own judgment or upon what they judge to be reasonable.ö For certain people, it is not a question of a choice or convenience ó utilitarian, purely aesthetic or merely reasonable ó but of an intuition backed up by a conviction that certain moral behaviors are imposed upon them as an absolute imperative. It seems that it is in this sense that, in terms surprising for their modernity, Moshe Hafetz expressed himself in his commentary on the Torah:

Let us imagine an individual who worships fire [í]. Considering his faith abominable, it is nonetheless possible that his intention is worthy even if his acts are not. The Eternal would not deprive any creature from his reward, and, after all, this non-Jew serves his Creator *as far as his reflection permits him to* [í]. It is on this subject that it is written ñThe righteous will live in their faithö (*Habakuk* 2:4). It is indeed possible that among the nations there exist such people, righteous and devoted in their acts and their thoughts, and in their relations to their neighbor [í]. Did not the Holy One, blessed be he, save the inhabitants of the great city of Niniva, even though they were not Hebrews? (*Melechet mahshevet*, ed. Venice 1710, p.4, hal. 2).

¹ The earliest attestation of the specific formula under consideration may be found in earliest patristic sources, e.g. Origen (185-254), *Homilies on Joshua* 3:5, or Cyprian (200-258), Letter 4:4.

² Cf. Huner Denzinger, *Symboles et définitions de la foi catholique* (Paris, 1996), p. 1351.

³ Cf. e.g., the proposals set forth by Irenaeus (130-208), *Against Heretics* 4:33:1, or Tertullian (155-220), *Against the Jews*, ch. 7.

⁴ However, according to the historian Jacob Katz (*Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961, chap. 12), active conversion of Gentiles was still perceptible until the end of the Middle Ages.

⁵ However, according to Nachmanides (13th century), the acceptance of the seven commandments of Noah should only be imposed upon those peoples living in the land of Israel, and not upon the neighboring peoples who may fall under the domination of Israel (cf. *Commentary on the Torah*, Dt 20:10).

⁶ For example, Saadia Gaon (882-942, *Sefer emunot ve-deot*, chap. 3) distinguishes the rational commandments from the necessary commandments. For Joseph Albo (14th c.): "If the law of Noah differs in its applications from the law of Moses, they are in agreement with each other on the general content" (*Sefer ha-ikarim*, I:25). See also, Israel Meir Lau, former askenazic chief rabbi of Israel, *Shut Yahel Israel* 72, 1992.

⁷ See E. Kant, in his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (trans. Lewis White Beck, New York: Macmillan, 1990, section I) who defends this conception of the superiority of the person that adopts a moral behavior because of *duty* rather than out of *inclination*.

⁸ Cf. *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh deah* 367:1 and *Kesef mishne*, *Hil. melachim* 8:11.

⁹ This little known source has only been identified in the 20th century: *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, ed. H. Enelow, New York, 1934, § 6, p. 121.

¹⁰ This designation, often rendered as "righteous among the nations," appears here for the first time.

¹¹ Jacob Katz (*op. cit.*, p. 230) considers that this typographic misprint led Spinoza to a very severe reading.

¹² Later, a *midrash* evokes a celestial voice proclaiming, day after day, from the very site of the Revelation: "Woe to humanity for having refused the Torah" (*Tanhuma*, *Ki tissa* 16; *Pesikta de-rav Kahana* 15, 121a; *Ct rabba* 41:6).

¹³ On this topic, see the excellent study by Menachem Marc Hirschman, *Torah for the Entire World* (in Hebrew, Tel Aviv, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999) which demonstrates that as early as Tannaitic times, the school of Rabbi Ismael considered that the Torah as a whole and not only the seven commandments of Noah was intended to be received and studied by humanity as a whole, and that resignation would result in their damnation.

¹⁴ By comparison, remark the conditions of access to the Kingdom of Heaven according to *Matthew* (7:13-14): "Enter the narrow gate. Broad and spacious is the path that leads to perdition, and there are many who trod it; but narrow is the gate and straight is the path which leads to Eternal Life, and there are few who find it."

¹⁵ Cf. *Tosefta*, *Sanhedrin* 13:2-3; *Rosh Hashanah* 17a. In these texts where it is an explicit question of the fate of the righteous and of the criminals in the hereafter, according to their degree of merit or sin, no distinction in terms of treatment is made between Jews and non-Jews, apart from, as we have seen, the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer. Cf. Rabbi Y. Emden, 17th c., *Sheilat Yaavets*, I:41.

¹⁶ According to the *Midrash ha-neelam* (26b), and subsequently, for the sources influenced by it, even the *gerei ha-tzedek* (converted) cannot enter into an equivalent place to that reserved for Jews by birth who are spiritually accomplished (Cf. *Sefer Meor einaim*, *Shemot*, *parshat Ve-eleh*).

¹⁷ Cf. *Hil. deot* 7:3; *Hil. teshuva* 3:6; *ibid* 4:6; *Hil. sanhedrin* 13:1.

¹⁸ If sinners among the people of Israel enjoy a place in the world to come, this remains nonetheless relative to the degree of relative merit of each individual (cf. *Shabbat* 152a). We should also note that certain Talmudic texts indicate that even criminals can, by a sudden gesture of their soul, accomplish an eminently commendable act and by this fact alone gain their place in the world to come (cf. *Avoda zara* 18a).

¹⁹ See also *Hil. teshuva* 3:11.

²⁰ It is on this basis that Rabenu Gershom (10th c.) authorized commerce with Christians, during their religious holidays (Cf. *Responsa Meor ha-gola*, ed. Eidelberg, pp.75-77).

²¹ This paragraph (like the parallel one of *Hil. avoda zara* 9:4) is not found in current editions as it was the object of Christian censorship. Cf. G. Tschernowitz, *The Relationship between Jews and Non-Jews according to Maimonides* (in Hebrew), New York, 1950.

²² Cf. "Is Judaism fundamentally racist?" in *Rabbinical Assembly of Israel, Law Committee Responsa*, Jerusalem, 5747, vol. 2, pp.43-52.

²³ One should note that this tolerant position on "associated faith" is the opposite of that articulated in the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* (cf. above).

²⁴ Cf. *Tosefot Sanhedrin* 63b, *asur*; *Bechorot* 2b, *Shema*. [] This point of view was explicitly adopted by Rabenu Yeruham ben Meshulam (Spain, 14th c. *Toldot Adam ve-Hava*, 17:5) as well as by other great Spanish decision-makers. This is also the opinion of R. Moshe Isserles (14th c., *Orach Chaim*, § 156) and this of R. Y. Landau (18th c., *Shut Noda bi-Yehuda*, *Yoreh dea*, 148).

²⁵ Cf. Nachmanides, 13th c., *Hidushim*, *Avoda zara* 13a; 35a, ed. of Jerusalem, 1962; R. Yitzak bar Sheshet, 14th c., *Responsa of Ribash*, § 119.

²⁶ Cf. for example, Moses Rivkes (17th c.), *Beer ha-Gola*, *Hoshen mishpat* 425:5; Rabbi Y. Emden, 17th c., *Sheilat Yaavets*, I: 41. For numerous other examples, see David Frankel, *Ha-knissa le-misgadim ve-knessiot*, *Teshuvot Vaad ha-Halachah VI, Tenuah masortit*, 1998.