



THE WHOLENESS OF DAILY LIFE IN JUDAISM

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It is not possible to enter into the dynamics of right Jewish conduct without starting from the *Torah*, the divine teaching revealed at Sinai whose precepts concern every aspect of human life. It is in fact by accepting these that the children of Israel became the “holy people of God” and took upon themselves a journey of witness that would span generations through the ages. The *Torah*, therefore is the foundation around which tradition was born and consolidated, becoming thereby a qualifying reference point for Jewish self-awareness in every age, whether that consciousness is secular or religious.

The term *Torah* refers, in the strict sense, to the Pentateuch, known also as the Mosaic Law; however it is possible to use the same term in a broad way that encompasses the entire biblical canon (*Torah* – Prophets – Writings) and its commentary. In every case, to consider the *Torah* exclusively as a Law is reductive, above all in the Western sense of the term, which stresses a juridical character. The term *Torah*, instead, derives from the Hebrew verb root *j-r-h* which includes meanings of “teach, instruct, guide towards a goal” – an action that necessarily implies respect for some rules of behavior, but which, in the context of the experience of the Covenant, recalls the relationship between God and human beings characterized by an important affective tone. It is no coincidence that the tradition compares it to a kind of “letter” that the Lord – absolutely transcendent – sends to humanity to reveal to them his character as at the same time immanent², and therefore near to the history of the people of whom he decided to make himself the traveling companion. The *Torah* is therefore understood as divine teaching revealed and entrusted to people so that they might fulfill the project of God in history, transforming an anonymous history into salvation history.

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² In the semitic perspective, immanence and divine transcendence are united in the mystery of God.

THE *TORAH*: A PROJECT FOR THE WORLD AND A “PERFECT” GIFT

According to the traditional teachings, the *Torah* preceded the creation of the world for which it constituted the project and foundation. All of this is explained starting from a passage in the *Book of Proverbs*, where we find reference to the “creating wisdom” of God, which came to be interpreted as His *Torah*:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). The *Torah* says, “I was the work-instrument of the Holy One, Blessed be He.” Normally a mortal king who builds a palace does not build it according to his own plans, but according to those of the architect; neither would the architect carry it out exclusively according to his own criteria, but he has parchments (plans of the project) and charts to know how to make the rooms, so that they come out [right]. Thus the Holy One, Blessed be He, looked at the *Torah* and created the universe, as the *Torah* itself says: “in the beginning (literally “with the beginning”) God created” (Gen 1:1). And the beginning is the *Torah*, as it is said: “The Lord begot me, the beginning of his works, the forerunner of his deeds of long ago [...]. I was beside him as an artisan” (Prov 8:22, 30)³.

The expression “In the beginning God created” with which the Book of Genesis begins is thus understood as “with the *Torah* God created,” insofar as it is considered to be the only foundation of the cosmic order. Without the *Torah* mortal chaos would reign; for this reason it must have pre-existed the creation of the world. According to some masters, the *Torah* preceded creation by two hundred years, while according to others it was written 974 generations before and then kept within the divine bosom⁴.

According to this view, the cosmic order depends on both the *Torah* itself and on the acceptance and fulfillment of the teachings contained in the precepts, while distancing oneself from the *Torah* means returning to original chaos. As with the co-existence in God of the dimensions of transcendence and immanence, also the pre-existence of the *Torah*, a fundamental thesis in rabbinic theology, puts us before a paradox: pre-existent, and yet given at a determined moment in history – after the flight from Egypt – and in a precise place, on Sinai. And the tradition holds that, until it was given through Moses, it remained a secret in God, jealously guarded by the angels and inaccessible to man. In the same horizon must be considered both its determined historical dimension, according to the canon established by tradition, and in its possibility of infinite being, in as much as it is open to interpretation that, from the historical point of view, is never exhausted.

“The *Torah* of the Lord is perfect; it refreshes the whole being of man.” Thus proclaims the eighth verse of Psalm 19, and the tradition explains that such perfection derives from it (*Torah*) being a mirror of the divine mind, and furthermore, an indispensable condition for every person’s the ability to understand and know. In a rabbinic homily on the perfection of the *Torah*, Nachman, one of medieval Judaism’s greatest commentators on Scripture, specifies as follows:

You must know above all that whatever created beings know and understand is all fruit of the *Torah* or fruit of its fruits (of the moral principles derived from it), and were it not for the *Torah*, there would not be a bit of difference between a man and the donkey he rides⁵.

The example, for all its subtle irony, still manages to present a concept through an original and meaningful image. In an analogous way, there is the person who explained the same perfection by comparing the *Torah* to a fruit which is completely edible:

What does it mean where it is written: “The one who tends the fig tree will eat its fruit” (Prov 27:18)? Why is the *Torah* compared to a fig tree? In all fruits there is an inedible part: in dates, there is the seed;

³ *Bereshit Rabbah*, I, 1.

⁴ Cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* VIII, 2; *Avot de Rabbi Natan* XXXI.

⁵ Moshéh ben Nachman (Nachmanide), *La Legge del Signore è perfetta. Omelia rabbinica sulla perfezione della Torah*, a c. di M. Perani, Carucci, Roma 1989, p. 48.

in the grape there are the grapeseeds; in the pomegranate there is the skin, but the fig is completely edible. In the same way, in the words of the *Torah* there is nothing to go to waste⁶.

The rabbinic commentary on the Song of Songs is also very eloquent in this, praising and exalting the absolute perfection of the *Torah* through a series of comparisons that are especially effective⁷, making use of elements that are as common and as vitally important as water, through which shine the perfection of that which the Divine Wisdom has reserved for the good of mankind. From this point of view the *Torah* can be nothing other than the source of life, understood also in its other-worldly aspect. In every case, if the *Torah* is perfect, it follows that it can never be surpassed or substituted by another revelation, because it was given whole and entire through Moses, and nothing of it still remains in heaven (cf. Dt 30:12)⁸.

And now we face a new paradox: it comes from heaven but speaks the language of human beings, and – according to the great master and mystic Rabbi Aqiva, who lived in the first half of the II century – its perfection lies in the fact that its text is never casual or meaningless, for which reason its every part, its every sign – even the most miniscule – must be interpreted, seeking to understand the meaning of the different writing where one letter is smaller or larger with respect to the others; so also even the blank spaces between letters and words is to be interpreted.

For this end, together with the *Torah*, the Lord also provided the tool for its interpretation, which is the oral *Torah*, also traced back to Sinai⁹ according to a precise interpretation:

At the time in which the Holy One, Blessed be He, revealed himself on Sinai to give the *Torah* to Israel, he gave it to Moses in this order: the Scripture, the *Mishnah*, the *Talmud* and the *Haggadah*¹⁰.

According to these explanations, the Sinai revelation includes both the *Torah* in its twofold form and its authoritative commentaries, the whole interpretive tradition, because:

Also that which a single disciple was destined to teach in the presence of his master was already spoken to Moses on Sinai¹¹.

The *Torah*, whether written or oral, was the “treasure” of the people of Israel which tradition guarded and handed on so that every generation could continue to have the experience of Sinai, constantly alert to listen to the divine voice which constitutes both an invitation to be a Covenant partner, and a commitment of life.

THE TORAH: A “WAY OF LIFE”

The *Torah* was received at Sinai as a “way” of life. According to rabbinic tradition, the Hebrews guided by Moses lived the experience of the Passover, of the passage from slavery to Pharaoh to the service of God¹², understanding the meaning of that event and vocation to which they were called precisely in the moment in which the *Torah*, the divine teaching revealed on Sinai, was given to them. That gift took place seven weeks after the flight from Egypt, and still today its memorial is celebrated during the feast of *Shavu 'ot*, which in Hebrew means “Weeks,” also known as Pentecost from the Greek term for the number fifty, since it is celebrated fifty days after Passover. All of this is connected to a specific historic experience: the teaching revealed by God and its reception on the part of the people, the deed which sealed the Covenant as bilateral, in that the initial commitment of the Lord (cf. Gen 12:1-4a) corresponds at this point also to that of man (cf. Ex 24:7).

⁶ *Babylonian Talmud*, 'Eruvim 54b.

⁷ Cf. *Shir haShirim Rabbah* I, 2.

⁸ Cf. *Devarim Rabbah* VIII, 6.

⁹ In the second century of the Christian era, after the fall of the Temple, the oral *Torah* was fixed in a written canon called the *Mishnah*. However, in the full sense, the oral *Torah* also includes the later rabbinic interpretations.

¹⁰ *Shemot Rabbah* XLVII, 1. The *Haggadah* is one of the literary genres in rabbinic Judaism.

¹¹ *Palestinian Talmud*, *Peah* 17a.

¹² In Hebrew the root ‘-v-d refers both to servitude/slavery as well as liturgical service; what makes the difference is the “Master” who is served.

Above all, God prepares the people to receive the duties incumbent upon election, which they will have to live as a service of witness among the nations. Here are the words with which he speaks to the Israelites through Moses:

Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is what you must tell the Israelites (Ex 19:5-6).

The reciprocity which binds the God of Israel to his people is clear: at the divine separation that set apart the descendants of Abraham from all the other peoples, and which in the biblical mindset is understood along the lines of a consecration, there must correspond the choice of a whole life in continual listening to the revealed teachings. It is not by accident that the narrative uses the expression “if you [will to] obey,” where the presence of the Hebrew root *sh-m-* ‘ points meaningfully to the profession of faith witnessed to in Deuteronomy and which begins with the following words:

Listen (*shema*’) Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!¹³ (Dt 6,4).

Therefore the priestly service which the people of Israel must carry out among the Gentiles consists in an active listening to the divine teaching revealed in the context of the *berit*, that is the pact of the Covenant that this people is called to observe. Because of all this the people is gathered together after the flight from Egypt (Ex 19:16), and all find themselves in the same place at the foot of Sinai: men, women and children, because all are called to commit themselves, each one giving personal consent. What God proposes is a holiness to which each one must tend according to the levitic exhortation:

You will be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am Holy (Lev 19:2).

The future tense of the verb “be”¹⁴ expresses the idea of a choice that has to be carried out over time, the sign that this dimension is one of the ways which God gives to man in the perspective of a goal to be reached.

If we observe the signs that accompany the theophany, and that the biblical witness always uses to underline the self-revelation of the Lord, we become aware that in this case it is a matter of thunder, lightning, dense clouds, the loud sound of a trumpet (Ex 19:16), but above all, fire:

Now Mount Sinai was completely enveloped in smoke, because the Lord had come down upon it in fire. The smoke rose from it as though from a kiln... (Ex 19:18).

Some comments find a particular relationship between the word of the Lord who reveals himself and the fire which accompanies the revelation, a characteristic which tradition considers common to many theophanies (cf. Ex 3:26 and Gen 15:17) and the word *Torah* itself, as emphasized in an authoritative commentary on Deuteronomy that, at a certain point, affirms:

in fact both [fire and *Torah*] were given from heaven and both are eternal¹⁵.

We are therefore before a divine event that, in this way, gives itself once for all time, according to a dynamic which permits each one to receive it according to his/her ability:

Rabbi Tanchuma says:

The voice of God on Sinai was understood by each one according to his/her ability to understand. The elders understood it according to their ability, the young according to their ability and also for the children, the nursing babies and the women. Even Moses understood it according to his ability. Therefore it is written: “Moses spoke to God and he answered him with a voice” (Ex 19:19). This means: with a voice that Moses could withstand¹⁶.

¹³ The rabbinic tradition teaches that the expression “the Lord is One” is to be understood also in the sense of being the only one able to save.

¹⁴ The Italian bishops’ translation [like the New American Bible] translates the term simply as [the indicative] “be holy.” The original Hebrew uses the imperfect form which indicates an action not yet completed, which remains open to evolution in time.

¹⁵ *Sifrè* on Deuteronomy 143a. The clarification in brackets is mine.

¹⁶ *Shemot Rabbah* V, 9.

You could say that this “eternal gift,” adapting itself to the receiver, enters into history respectful of the “seasons” of man, who at any rate is called to understand and interiorize the teachings revealed, assimilating them progressively, making them his own at the different stages of life, in the awareness that study and prayer are, for the Jew, two equally important precepts.

However the gift of the *Torah* is not only destined to continue in time, but is offered both to the people of Israel and to humanity as a whole. Among the rabbinic commentaries that support this view there is a very famous one which claims to unite the universality of the Sinaitic revelation with the passage in Exodus where it is affirmed that “all the people saw the voices” (Ex 20:18)¹⁷, an emphasis that is explained thus:

Why “the voices”? Because the voice of the Lord turned itself into seven sounds and from these into the seventy languages, so that all people would be able to understand¹⁸.

This division, which takes place according to a number which in the Bible points to universality, is ordered, therefore, to an understanding that has all mankind in mind and that, in conformity with the dynamics that are typical in biblical revelation, favor relationship and reciprocity. In this context, the relationship between Moses and God (that with regard to the people acts as a mediation itself) is fundamental and the narrative does not neglect to emphasize this. The original Hebrew corresponds to the following translation:

Moses was speaking and God was answering him in the voice (Ex 19:19).

The expression “was speaking” is rendered in the Masoretic text with the intensive verb form *jedabber*, which emphasizes the revelatory character of such speech, where it is Moses the mediator of the revelation whom God vouched for, in seventy languages.

If we now go from the signs to the effects which all this produced in the post-biblical rabbinic tradition, we find further interesting elements: the gift of the *Torah* on Sinai was not universal only because the Lord expressed himself in seventy languages, but it is universal also with reference to the twofold character of that gift: in fact, Judaism considers the divine teaching in twofold form: 613 *mitsvot* (precepts) for the Jews, and 7 Noahic (that is, given by God to Noah after the flood) precepts for all the non-Jews; both considered the one *Torah* of God revealed to mankind on Sinai¹⁹. In the *Book of Jubilees*, which dates to the second century before the Christian era, we read that the Jewish Pentecost should be celebrated as a memorial of the Covenant between God and Noah, that is, between God and all humanity and not only between God and the Jews²⁰.

Now let us turn to the 24th chapter of *Exodus*, where the Scripture presents the words with which the people of Israel, freed from Egypt, commit themselves to receive the Sinaitic teachings as a program of life. If we literally translate the Hebrew text of this, we have the following affirmation:

All that the Lord has said/revealed we will carry out (*n'aseh*) and listen to (*wenishma'*) (Ex. 24:7)²¹

As one can see, the verb “listen” appears again, and this time it appears as a consequence of an action that otherwise is not present if one does not carry out the precepts. The expression is not immediately clear for a Westerner who approaches the text from his/her own cultural tradition, so it is fitting to understand what all this means in the context of the biblical experience that unfolds according to a rather different way of thinking. We are facing a way of conceptualizing that is strictly united with action, and in a certain way, successive to it. The Jews who pronounced these words are the same one who had just lived through an experience of deliverance unique in kind, and the God

¹⁷ The translation corresponds to the original Hebrew, but differs from that of the Italian Bishops' Conference [and the New American Bible's “all the people witnessed the thunder”].

¹⁸ *Shemot Rabbah* V, 9.

¹⁹ Interesting in this regard is the work of E. Benamozegh, *Israele e l'umanità*, Marietta, Genova 1990, especially pages 181-277.

²⁰ Cf. J.J. Petuchowski, *Le feste del Signore*, Ed Dehoniane, Napoli 1987, pp. 47-48.

²¹ The new version of the Italian Bishops Conference offers a translation in line with the original Hebrew, correcting the earlier version that had translated the verb “to listen” as equivalent with “to do.”

who set them free, proving his fidelity to his promises, cannot but will their good and for this reason teaches them to keep the pact of the Covenant so that it might last through time. It is not by accident that the rabbinic teachings, playing on the assonance of the Hebrew terms *charut* (inscribe) and *cherut* (freedom), say to consider the precepts of the *Torah* as “freedom” on tablets, rather than norms “inscribed” on tablets²². The revealed teaching therefore is listened to and lived in as much as it comes from the only God able to deliver and to transform an anonymous story of perdition into salvation history. But since man is gifted with reason, living in this way makes him capable of listening to, that is of understanding, the values that underlie such teaching.

In other words: it is in the context of an experiential journey in which man lets himself be guided by the word/event²³ with which the Lord leads him that he understands. The people of Israel thus receive the *Torah* as an ethical duty and as an invitation to listening, in the perspective of an ever-greater understanding of revelation given in history as a testimony that is always more radical and conscious, and in the awareness that the first witness is that of parents with regard to their children:

...that you may recount to your son and grandson how I made a fool of the Egyptians and what signs I did among them, so that you may know that I am the Lord (Ex 10:2).

The Sinaitic Pentecost thus understood is nowadays celebrated in Jewish tradition as a “nuptial contract”: on this occasion, the *Torah*, which is called *ketubbah*, that is “contract/wedding covenant” and thus with the same term that designates the religious document that witnesses to the marriage between a man and a woman, an act that expresses the reciprocity of human love understood starting from its transcendent root, and by definition *qiddushin*, that is, a consecration/dedication capable of making God present through authentic relationships²⁴. The deliverance from slavery in Egypt is thus connected with a nuptial bond that gives particular meaning to the four verbs of liberation witnessed to in the sixth chapter of *Exodus*: *jatza*, to bring out; *natzal*, to snatch/save; *ga'al*, rescue; *laqach*, to take (cf. Ex 6:6-7), which correspond in a meaningful way to the four cups of wine over which one blesses the Name of God in the annual Jewish celebration of Passover.

We can therefore say that the root, the foundation, of the “Sinaitic matrimony” between God and the people is the experience of the Passover, of the Exodus that fulfilled the *berit*, the “promise,” and of which the reception and observance of the *Torah* is a sign and revelation in history: Only a free people can bear witness to that, and only if it is accepted and lived in time can the *Torah* become *ketubbah*, that is “nuptial covenant” and “light for the nations” as recalled by the prophecy of Isaiah (cf. Is 2:3). For this reason, at Pentecost the Jews read the *Book of Ruth*, the Moabite who through her relationship with her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi meets the God of Israel and becomes an important figure in the Davidic line (cf. Ruth 4:13-22).

To seek the good together it is important not to lose sight of the importance of the divine teaching revealed according to the indications of the Book of Deuteronomy, which recalls that the *Torah* “is not in heaven” but has been entrusted to human beings so that, understanding it ever better, they can “choose life” (Dt 30:1ff).

Therefore in the perspective of a Word that must be constantly re-understood in the light of new contexts, the Jewish tradition has developed what we might call a culture of commentary, of comparison, of discussion in view of examining throughout time all the meanings of Revelation for life. This has always come about under the sign of a pluralism that, while inserted within an authoritative interpretive tradition, surprisingly has no magisterium; in Judaism the only dogma is that God has spoken, has revealed himself, but there is much debate on what he said... For this reason the rabbinic sources frequently present the positions of Masters who even contradict each other, for, according to the point of view mentioned above, every perspective can be useful for better

²² Cf. *Mishnah, Avot VI, 2*.

²³ In the original Hebrew of the biblical text the one term *davar* embraces both meanings.

²⁴ The term *qiddushin* comes from the root *q-d-sh* which includes the meanings of “consecrate and sanctify.” For a deepening of this aspect, refer to: E. Bartolini, *La santità delle relazione uomo-donna della rivelazione*, in Aa. Vv., *La reciprocità uomo-donna via di spiritualità coniugale e familiare* (Atti della Quinta Settimana Nazionale di studi sulla spiritualità familiare e coniugale promossa dalla CEI, Rocca di Papa, 24-29 April 2001) Città Nuova, Roma 2001, pp. 33-71.

understanding a truth that has not yet had its definitive fulfillment in history. That which the Jew seeks in Scripture and in traditional commentary is not necessarily an answer, but rather some indications that redirect the questions and reopen the discussion towards new horizons. And that such pluralism might be authentic it is important to respect different positions, as this famous talmudic passage highlights:

A debate between the schools of Shammai [famous for his rigidity] and of Hillel [famous instead for his openness] lasted three years. This side was insisting that the *Torah* [its application] should be defined according to their opinion; and that side was insisting that the *Torah* must be defined according to theirs.

In the end, a heavenly voice resounded: "The opinions of both these and those are the Word of the Living God! However the *Torah* should be defined according to the dispositions of the school of Hillel!"

But how is it possible? If these as well as those are the "Word of the Living God," what authorizes the school of Hillel to define the *Torah* only according to their determinations?

This happened because the wise ones of the school of Hillel were gentle and modest. They used to study not only their own traditions, but also the traditions of the school of Shammai. What is more, they even used to hand on the doctrines of the school of Shammai before handing down their own teachings²⁵.

Thus the importance of a dialectic that remains ever loyal and respectful of points of view other than one's own was stressed.

It is in this perspective that the hermeneutic of the Masters of Israel should be seen. It is the same one used by Jesus of Nazareth who, among other things, was a contemporary of Hillel: We do not know if they ever met or not, but it is possible to discover significant parallels in their teachings and their way of acting, as in the following case:

One time a pagan went to Shammai and said to him: "I will convert to Judaism on the condition that you teach me the entire *Torah* while I stand on only one foot." With his staff in hand, Shammai threw him out immediately.

The pagan went to Hillel and again expressed his desire: "I will convert to Judaism on the condition that you teach me the entire *Torah* while I stand on only one foot." Hillel accepted him into Judaism and instructed him thus: "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself. This is the whole *Torah*. The rest is commentary. Go and study!"²⁶.

The similarity with the attitudes of Jesus and with the "golden rule" witnessed in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 7:12) which confirms the Levitical commandment of love of neighbor (Lev 19:18) is obvious²⁷. But let us return to Hillel's exhortation: "The rest is commentary. Go and study!" which recalls a tradition that seeks to "adorn" religious practice by building a hedge around the *Torah*, as is taught in the oral tradition:

Moses received the *Torah* from Sinai and delivered it to Joshua; Joshua delivered it to the Elders and the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets delivered it to the members of the Great Assembly. These last ones used to say three things: "Be careful in making judgments, train many disciples and build a hedge around the *Torah*"²⁸.

The "hedge" represents a safe enclosure, that is, the precautions added by the Masters so that the revealed teachings might be observed with greater precision and radicality, in continuity with prior tradition. We could say that it is a matter of a search and of a commentary that generates commentary; a discussion that opens new discussions, because as Ben BagBag said:

Turn it this way and that, since everything is in it [the *Torah*]; meditate on it, grow old and worn in it, and do not move away from it because there is nothing more beneficial for you²⁹.

The relationship between the people of Israel and the *Torah* is therefore a vital relationship: it is not a matter of something that only concerns the intellectual sphere, but of a teaching that gives

²⁵ *Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin* 13b. My own clarifications are in brackets.

²⁶ *Babylonian Talmud, Shabbath* 31a.

²⁷ For a deeper comparison between Jesus and Hillel's way of acting in the context of the Teachers of Israel, see J. Neusner, *Il giudaismo nei primi secoli del cristianesimo*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1989, in particular pp. 69-145.

²⁸ *Mishnah, Avot* I, 1.

²⁹ *Mishnah, Avot* V, 21. My specifications are in the brackets.

direction to life. Even the most secular position must, in some way, confront itself with the “way” of the precepts, in the light of which every moment of life gains meaning, becoming the witness of holiness for all the nations.

From an external perspective Jewish conduct can seem exaggerated, in as much as it is very precise, detailed and bound to numerous symbolic gestures. However, this way of living, which sets the Jews apart from other peoples, is the sign of a faithfulness to the “pact” with God that, from generation to generation, is renewed and handed on, as well witnessed in the opening verses of Ps 78:

Attend, my people, to my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable,
unfold the puzzling events of the past.

What we have heard and know;
things our ancestors have recounted to us.
We do not keep them from our children;

we recount them to the next generation,
The praiseworthy deeds of the Lord and his strength,
the wonders that he performed.

God made a decree in Jacob,
established a law [*Torah*: divinely revealed teaching] in Israel:

Which he commanded our ancestors,
they were to teach their children;
That the next generation might come to know,
Children.

In turn they were to recount them to their children,
that they too might put their confidence in God,
And not forget God’s deeds,
but keep his commandments (Ps 78:1-7)³⁰.

Such a dynamic, realized in words and deeds, concerns every moment of life:

Take to heart these words (*devarim*) which I command you today. Keep repeating them to your children. Recite them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them on your arm as a sign and let them be as a pendant on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates (Dt 6:6-9).

Any moment whatever, in fact, could be opportune for arousing questions that become an ideal moment for a witness of faith and the handing on of the tradition, which becomes especially meaningful during the celebration of festivals and the religious stages of life, events bound up with the family liturgy which in Judaism is more important than that of the synagogue, and where the woman—the guarantor of household holiness that includes also the food laws—has a fundamental role: in particular, she is the only one who can light the festival lamps, symbol of the holiness of God which enters into “profane” time, in as much as only the woman bears within herself the biological rhythms of the sacredness of life.³¹ For this reason, belonging to the people of Israel is tied to matrilineal descent: “He is a Jew who is born of a Jewish mother,”³² and without her there is no guarantee of Jewish religious life or of the family liturgy.

³⁰ For further deepening, see: E. L. Bartolini De Angeli, *Torah, popolo e Terra nella tradizione ebraica*, in: E. L. Bartolini De Angeli - C. Di Sante, *Ai piedi del Sinai. Israele e la voce della Torah*, EDB, Bologna 2014, pp. 7-81.

³¹ This refers to the menstrual cycle and to childbirth, moments characterized by the sign of blood, an element which belongs to God and leads to his holiness. Concerning the role of the woman in Judaism, see: E. L. Bartolini, in: Aa. Vv., *Le donne nelle culture del mediterraneo. Religione, politica, libertà di pensiero* (Quaderni Nangeroni 2006), Association Culturale Mimesis, Milano 2006, pp. 23-48.

³² It is, however, possible to convert to Judaism according to the rules fixed by tradition.