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Rabinowitz and Lichtenstein

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Some interesting events in Budapest occurred a century ago in October of 1891. One of the people involved was Joseph ben David Rabinowitz, the then well-known Russian Hebrew Christian from Kishinev in Bessarabia who in 1885-86 had formed a congregation called "Israelites of the New Covenant." The other key person was Rabbi Isaak Lichtenstein (not to be confused with Yehiel Lichtenstein, Rabinowitz's brother-in-law who taught at the Institutum Jadaicum in Leipzig). Rabbi Isaak Lichtenstein worked in Hungary and was also a well-known Jewish Christian. A third key person was Rabinowitz's wife, who, together with their daughter Rachel, had come with Rabinowitz to Budapest on a three-day stay.

I. Rabbi Rabinowitz

On 5 October 1891 a message sent from Budapest set the telegraph ticking in Kishinev, Bessarabia. The telegram had only two words: "Mama gerettet" ("Mother saved"). The sender was Joseph Rabinowitz. The recipients were his children. "Mama" was his wife.

A. *General Background*

In 1882 Joseph Rabinowitz had travelled to Palestine to look into the possibility of a Jewish settlement there for the hard-pressed Russian Jews. Immigration to Israel might be an answer to the Jewish question. His encounter with Palestine was a disappointment. Yet he returned to his hometown of Kishinev as a new person; he had come to faith in Yeshua the Messiah.

There are many indications that he did not travel to Palestine with the hope and desire of becoming a believer in Jesus. Yeshua met him and took him by surprise. Yet even when Jesus takes someone by surprise, something ordinarily precedes the creation of faith in the heart. In this case Rabinowitz many years earlier had been given a Hebrew New Testament. How much or how little he had read in it remains uncertain. Compared to his subsequent study of it, he had read little. Compared to what other Russian Jews of that time had read, he had read much. In any case, he brought it along on his journey. A few words from the New Testament came to his mind while he was sitting on the Mount of Olives. The lesson is that

distributing copies of the New Testament bears fruit. We may not see the fruit ourselves. Many Jews, however, who have come to faith in Jesus have testified that at some time they were given a New Testament and that they had peeked into it—sometimes secretly. It is a "dangerous" thing to peek into a New Testament, even if it is done secretly. For the Word of God testifying of Jesus may overcome prejudice.

Back in Kishinev Rabinowitz established himself as a lawyer, but when he began telling his clients of his new-found faith, his business suffered. Rabinowitz buried himself in Scripture, and in time his faith gained in clarity.

B. Rabinowitz and Baptism

1. The Baptism of the Family

In March of 1885 Rabinowitz was baptized in Berlin. While he was in Palestine in 1882, his eldest son had been baptized in St. Petersburg, where he was a student. Rabinowitz's three daughters were baptized in Rohrbach in October of 1887 by the Hebrew Christian A. Venetianer. Rabinowitz's two other sons were baptized in October of 1888. Of his immediate family only his wife had not yet been baptized. E. H. Leitner, a clergyman in Constantinople, described her, after his visit to Kishinev in 1887, as a formerly "fanatical Jewess who now loves Jesus and together with Magdalene calls him 'Rabboni,' that is, 'my Master.'"

The baptism of Mrs. Rabinowitz took place in Budapest in the meeting hall of the Free Church of Scotland. The Reverend Andrew Moody writes of this occasion as follows:

We have had several baptisms during the year, the most interesting being that of Mrs. Rabinowitz, the wife of Mr. Joseph Rabinowitz of Kischineff, the well-known Hebrew Christian reformer. He was himself baptized some years ago in Berlin by Mr. Mead, an American pastor, it being his desire to confess in baptism the name of the Lord Jesus Christ as his Saviour, but not to be received into any of the existing churches in Russia. His children followed and now his beloved wife. When her husband took the decisive step,

she had shed tears at the thought that one of such high repute in Israel and so dear to her should bend the knee before the despised Jesus of Nazareth, but she had herself soon after, responding to the call "Come and see," had her own eyes opened to behold the glory of Him who came out of Nazareth, and it was with joy that she now confessed her faith in Him as her own Saviour. The event was very touching and solemn. After the service, which took place on the afternoon of Monday, 5th October, Mr. Rabinowitz telegraphed home, "Mama gerettet" ("Mother saved"). On the evening of the day following he delivered a lecture about Jesus in the large hall of our school building. There was a large attendance, and one or two prominent men of the Jewish community were present. Next day he had an interesting interview with Rabbi Lichtenstein, who, on my invitation, came in from Tapio-Szele to see him. Miss Rachel Rabinowitz, who came with her parents, remained here till Christmas, and had the opportunity of seeing something of our school work and of the mission work generally.

The reason why Rabinowitz did not himself baptize his children and his wife is that the Russian authorities would not allow him to administer baptism. The reason why he and his family were not baptized in Kishinev by the Lutheran pastor Rudolf Faltin, with whom Rabinowitz was on good terms at the beginning of his public stand, is that he would then have had to renounce his Jewish identity. These points require some elaboration.

2. The Baptism of Rabinowitz Himself

Rabinowitz was baptized, as previously noted, in Berlin in March of 1885. This action came as a shock to Rudolf Faltin, the Lutheran pastor in Kishinev. If, however, Rabinowitz had been baptized by Faltin, he would have become a Lutheran and, according to Russian law of the day, he would have ceased to be a Jew. Rabinowitz, contrariwise, desired ardently to retain his Jewish identity. Rabinowitz had already discussed the question thoroughly with Wilhelm Faber, who was right hand to Franz Delitzsch, when Faber in 1885

was in Kishinev for the second time. In the course of those conversations Rabinowitz gradually came to believe in the sacramental nature of baptism and so in its application to infants as well as adults. He adopted, then, the understanding of baptism expressed in the Lutheran Confessions.

After discussions in Leipzig with, among others, Franz Delitzsch and John Wilkinson, arrangements were made for Rabinowitz to be baptized in Berlin—under quite extraordinary circumstances. He was baptized in a Bohemian Lutheran church by a Congregationalist (Methodist) pastor and professor, C. M. Mead, from Andover, Massachusetts. In the presence of a few invited people Rabinowitz was baptized using a creed written by himself in Hebrew—after having testified to being in complete concurrence with the Apostles' Creed. In this way Rabinowitz was baptized into the universal church of Christ without losing his Jewish identity. Delitzsch recognized this end and defended Rabinowitz when he was later attacked.

3. The Baptism of Others

Rabinowitz himself, then, was baptized, but he never received permission to baptize or to administer the sacraments. The authorities would only allow him to function as a preacher. Although we may speak of his "congregation," it must be borne in mind that he was never given permission to establish a church in the biblical sense. It goes without saying that a church in the biblical sense cannot exist without baptism and holy communion. Such being the case, it is no wonder that Rabinowitz's movement crumbled after his death. In 1887 it looked as if this situation could be avoided. Some members of his congregation were baptized in Rohrbach by the Hungarian Jewish Christian A. Venetianer. The authorities, however, quickly put a stop to that procedure, possibly owing to appeals from Faltin or others in the Lutheran church of Kishinev.

II. Rabbi Lichtenstein

A. Conversations with Rabinowitz

Concerning the encounter between Rabinowitz and Lichtenstein

on 7 October 1891 Andrew Moody, as we have seen, wrote simply: "Next day he had an interesting interview with Rabbi Lichtenstein, who, on my invitation, came in from Tapio-Szele to see him." The words "interesting interview" are sufficiently vague to allow any interpretation. Three weeks after this encounter Rabinowitz gives a more specific account of the results. In a letter of 30 October 1891 to H. Müller of the German Central Agency, Rabinowitz tells him he had met with Lichtenstein at Moody's house on two occasions, and he proceeds to criticize Lichtenstein's Christianity. By virtue of their conversations and his reading of Lichtenstein's book, *Judaism and Christianity*, Rabinowitz reached the conclusion that Lichtenstein had not taken the crucial step away from Judaism, had not yet realized that one cannot put a patch on an old garment. Rabinowitz expressed the hope that Lichtenstein might be granted "a living and pure faith in the only begotten Son, Jesus."

Already in a letter of 22 February 1889 Rabinowitz had written to Moody that Moody should greet Lichtenstein and remind him of what was written in John 12:23-24 and Romans 6:4: "And Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'" "We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Rabinowitz continued the letter, which was published in the annual report of the Free Church of Scotland, with some words clearly disapproving of Lichtenstein's failure to be baptized. "If Rabbi Lichtenstein verily loves his people Israel . . . let him be baptized." By being baptized he would set a good example to be followed by others, something of which there is more need than theological learning.

B. Conversations with Others

Rabinowitz, of course, was by no means the first to urge baptism on Lichtenstein, nor would he be the last. Dr. Somerville, for instance, a prominent figure of the Free Church of Scotland, had done so in the autumn of 1888. In a report filed in 1889 the church's collaborator in Budapest stated:

Dr. Somerville, in writing to me recently, gave expression to his fear that he [Lichtenstein] would die without being baptized, and that thus his testimony might be weakened, and in measure lost. He does not as yet take the same view of the matter as we do, but still clings tenaciously to the idea that his testimony has greater weight because he is not baptized; but while we cannot dislodge him from his position by our arguments, we may hope and pray that he may be further instructed and led by the Spirit of God.

Clearly this was not the first time that baptism had come up for discussion between Rabinowitz and the Scots. In the same vein Andrew Moody, before bringing Rabinowitz into the picture in the way previously noted, had already written of Lichtenstein as follows:

Our friend the Rabbi of Tapio-Szele, whom I have happily the opportunity of seeing from time to time, still maintains somewhat the same position as he did a year ago. When in the Tyrol I addressed an earnest appeal to him, the purport of which was: "And now why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized!" He replied: "Best thanks to you, reverend sir, for remembering me when you are at a distance. Be assured that your form hovers before my eyes, and that every day I pray fervently to the Almighty for your complete recovery. As regards your pious wish, I regret that in the interest of the holy cause itself I cannot fulfil it. It is high time that a Jew, as a Jew, should take his place at the gate of the camp and cry, 'Kiss the Son lest He be angry, and ye perish from the way.' 'Do homage to Jesus as the rightful heir to the Kingdom.' 'For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us, having abolished in His flesh the enmity. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.' He is that heavenly ladder which stands on the earth, the top of which touches the heaven, and the angels of God ascend and descend upon it, and the Lord Himself stands above it. My adversaries agitate without ceasing against me, but I have built upon a rock, and am therefore not moved. Saluting you in the name of God, His Anointed, and the

Holy Spirit who hath made both one, I am, yours respectfully,
J. Lichtenstein, District Rabbi.

Lichtenstein's view, then, was firmly established by the time that he encountered Rabinowitz in 1891 and was unlikely to change.

Conclusion

Lichtenstein, in fact, declined the counsel of Rabinowitz and others to the end and so died unbaptized in 1909. To Rabinowitz, on the other hand, baptism was important, so important that he would allow nothing to prevent it. At the same time, it was important that it take place in such a manner as would enable him to retain his Jewish identity. There is a message for us today in the telegram which Rabbi Rabinowitz sent to his children on 5 October 1891: "Mama gerettet." In spite of all the external difficulties and internal controversies in 1891, there were Jews who were being saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus the Messiah. The same things can happen today. The difficulties which we face are no greater than those experienced by the Christians of a century ago.

The original form of this essay was delivered by Kai Kjaer-Hansen to the Eighth North American Coordinating Committee Meeting of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism. (The original has here been abridged by omitting various points of application to the work of the particular organization which he was addressing.)