

PART II

"Isaiah 53 and the despiced Messiah of his despiced people"

The reality of being mocked and despised

Once when I was in Hamburg I bought a book called "Die Reise durch den letzten Akt", "The journey through the last Act". It described what the German political prisoner **Isa Vermehren** felt as a woman when she was transported to the concentration camps in Ravensbrück, Buchenwald and Dachau. It taught in a concrete way what it meant for a human being to be mocked and despised. The worst thing was not the hunger, the cold, the fear, the pain or the hatred which they confronted, but the beating and the strikes which were directed *in the face*. It broke the soul to become mutilated and deformed, and for a woman - the loss of her personality. In Greek the word "*prosoopon*", face, corresponds also a "*person*". The loss of human dignity, the humiliation and dehumanization, strips off the willpower and hope. This I saw in "the last act" of Isa Vermehren. Jesus also was mocked and roughly handled. He was blindfolded and hit in the face. This "*colafix*" game imported from Greece had become a children's favorite: one player had his head covered with a hood and the others made him guess who had touched him. The soldiers however made it in a most brutal way!

In **Isaiah 52:14 - 53:3** we read about the Suffering Servant of the Lord something similar. "His *appearance* was so *disfigured* beyond that of any man and his *form* marred beyond human likeness" - "He had *no form nor comeliness* and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should see him" - "He was *despised* and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was *despised*, and we esteemed him not." The rest is known to us by heart. The outward appearance is mostly very important to us. The Suffering Servant was not going to be esteemed by his own people. In **Phil. 2:7** we read about the Messiah according to King James Version, that he "made himself of no reputation (emptied himself)" and "being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself." This is the meaning of the concept "despised".

The Hebrew text uses in the **third verse of Isaiah 53** the expression "*hadal ishim*" which means that "he ceased to be human, a man" - a kind of dehumanization, which was seen in concentration camps. The Hebrew concept in the verse **52:14** "*mushat*", *disfigured* has also many nuances of meaning: deteriorated, spoiled, polluted, degraded, corrupted, marred and even maimed. No wonder that the people are "hiding their faces from him". In a certain Rabbinic source there is an explanation, that "his appearance is so ugly that no one stands to look at him".

According to Isaiah **53:4** the word "*nagua*" or "*stricken*" has led to the well known cryptic name of the Messiah, the "*Hivrah*" or "*leper*". There is a special section in the Talmud, *negaim*, concerned with the identification and isolation of leprosy. The Aramaic word *Hivrah* originally meant "white" and then later "leper", as this terrifying

disease at a certain stage in its development forms something like a white film on the skin. As the Messiah, *Hivrah* identifies with the fate of the sick person. In **Masechet Sanhedrin 97b** the Talmud ponders with the question, how the Messiah will be known. Elijah then gives his answer: He is at the Roman Gates (where the Christians are) -- "and what is the *sign* by which he may be known?" "He will be sitting with the poor and the sick, and all those whom he frees he binds at the same time; he will free one and he will bind the other." The Messiah takes care of degraded and unworthy people. In Hebrews 12 there is an advice for all the afflicted: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame"! In **Isaiah 63:9** we read: "In all their affliction he was afflicted and the angel of his presence saved them." For some rabbis "*Malakh ha-panim*", or "the Angel of of his Face" in this verse, is the Messiah. And one of them is stating, that "*he is in the task given by God, and always when Israel is afflicted even he is distressed*". This is the spiritual message of the Suffering Servant also in Isaiah 53.

The theological dilemma of this chapter

The dominant theology even with its moderate representatives tends to question whether the oldest Jewish tradition has any justification to understand the prophecy of the Suffering Servant as a Messianic prediction. If not, then the use of Isaiah 53 can not support the Christian understanding of the chapter. The New Testament however frequently interprets Isaiah 53 as referring to Jesus. (See eg. **Matthew 8:17, Luke 22:37, Acts 8:32 or 1 Peter 2:22-25**)

In his book "The Sacrifice and Forgiveness" published by IUSTITIA in 2002, Prof. **Antti Laato** wrote: "The early Jewish tradition *has never* emphasized that the Servant of Isaiah 53 would be the Messiah who suffers and dies for the sin of his people"; "the similar Christian tradition of the atoning death *has never* been linked with the Messiah in the ancient Jewish texts"; and "the interpretation of Isaiah 53 about the vicarious sufferings and death of the Messiah *has even never* fitted to the Jewish interpretative horizon of the text" (p. 184). A little earlier he explains: "As a conclusion we can find, that *the only sure (?) interpretation*, which is to be found in the texts from the time of the Second Temple about Isaiah 53 is, that the fate of its Servant speaks of suffering righteous people" (p. 124).

This theological dilemma among some of our conservative scholars is very confusing indeed. First of all they forget that the New Testament is treated in Israel as a Jewish literature which precedes the other normative Rabbinic sources. Second, it shows that Christian theologians do not know enough of the Jewish thinking nor the reasons why certain opinions have won the preference in their mind. Thirdly they forget the Jewish self-censorship, which closes the doors for those who are not able to read freely the RASHI script and the medieval Jewish commentaries.

Some of the Jewish scholars do not share the same impression of this delicate chapter which is described above. **Joel E. Rembaum** has an extensive article of the "Jewish Exegetical Tradition Regarding Isaiah 53" in which he openly deals with this matter. He writes as follows: "The commentators of the Middle Ages generally wrote comprehensive and systematic commentaries on the complete Bible or on complete

books or sections. Thus, a commentary on the book of Isaiah would automatically include a treatment of chapter 53. -- Most of the ancient Jewish sources treat only selected segments of Isaiah 53 and reflect no interest in seeking a unifying concept for the entire passage." -- *"It is reasonable to view this relative silence as a form of Jewish self-censorship in the face of the Christian emphasis on the Christological meaning of such passages and as an attempt to control Messianic movements and speculation among Jews."* -- (See **E. E. Urbach**, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975, 649-692) "However, **Urbach** demonstrates how complex the rabbinic reaction to Messianic speculations was and how *an anti-Christian polemical motive cannot be assumed to be an ever-present factor in the rabbinic thinking on this matter.*"

In this light it will be helpful to see **the whole "horizon"** of this matter in smaller units. We can find from a wider perspective that there is *a threefold message* to be seen: Isaiah 53 has a *spiritual dimension* which concerns all the believers both Christians and Jews. It can be applied also to *the despised people of Israel*. But the traditional interpretation about *the sufferings of the Messiah* is still the strongest one in the Jewish literature. It is reason to distinguish always between the *Jewish literature* of Septuagint, Qumran and the New Testament and the *rabbinic interpretations* beginning from the Talmudic period and on.

But what can we say about Isaiah 53 in the light of wider spectrum?

The main question is whether this chapter speaks of an individual person or rather of a collective nation, Israel. It is emphasized in Jewish tradition that Isaiah 53 would be best interpreted as **collectively**. The logical link with the collective understanding is mainly based on verse 8 in which we read: *"He was stricken for the transgression of my people"*. The Hebrew expression about "he", *"lamo"*, can be understood both in plural *"they"* or in singular, *"he"*. The whole chapter presents, however, a contrast between him and us: "He was despised and rejected", "he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrow", "he was wounded for our transgressions" and "he was bruised for our iniquities" etc. If we interpret the word *"lamo"* in plural, as also Laato does, it would mean that Israel was "stricken" because of their own transgressions - a horrible thing which leads easily to side tracks!

The **first answer** for cracking this hard nut can be found in the exegetical comparing of the oldest OT texts. The Greek **Septuagint** offers only one alternative: *"apo toon anomian tou laou mou"* - "because of the iniquities of my people *he was led to death*". The text of Isaiah 53:8 in the Scrolls from **Qumran** Cave I is almost the same as the Masoretic one, *"mipasha ammo nogea lamo"* as the conventional text runs as follows: *"mipasha ammi nega lamo"*. The expression of "my people" is here in the form *"his people"* and the word "was stricken" is in the text of Qumran in the form *"is stricken"* which means literally *"touches upon"* or *"concerns"* him. All the other corresponding verses in the Qumran text are speaking about "him" and "us" as is done in the Masoretic text. May it be said also that the English, German, French or Swedish translations are following the above interpretation.

The **second figure** of the Suffering Servant is linked with **Ephraim the son of Joseph**. In **Jeremiah 31:9 and 20** he is called as "my first born" and "my darling

child". He is seen in Jewish writings as a suffering Messiah. This item ought to be dealt more closely not in order to solve the ultimate exegetical problem but rather in order to present the wide spectrum of thoughts which are concealed in this matter.

In the Jewish tradition the discussion about Ephraim the son of Joseph is always linked with **Zechariah 12:9-14 and 13:6-7**. We read there about him "whom they have pierced" and mourn for him, as one mourns for an only son - and they are asking, "what are these wounds" on your "back" (in Hebrew "hands"). Regarding the words of Zechariah that "they will look upon me whom they have pierced", the Mikraoth Gedoloth explains that **RaSHI, RaDaK and Ibn Ezra** relate it to the Messiah, Ephraim son of Joseph. The Talmud agrees with this interpretation. The story about Ephraim serves for the traditional understanding among the rabbis.

The **Talmud** contains a tradition regarding the history of this son of Joseph, according to which *the "sons" of Ephraim attempted prematurely to invade Canaan and met their deaths in the struggle*. However, this Messiah, Ephraim the son of Joseph, did not suffer - he died in the battlefield. And the description of Isaiah 53 does not fit to it.

The **third aspect** about the "person" of the Messiah has been strongly disputed in the earliest sources. **Joseph Klausner** has stated in his Hebrew edition about the Messianic Idea that *even though "we can find many prophecies from the prophetic age in which there are unquestionable references to the hoped-for deliverance, in all this there is not a single hint to a Messiah's person"*. After these words, however, he specified his claim saying that this concerns the time of Tannaim and that Christians tried to omit the national fulfillment of the Messianic expectation preserving only its spiritual nature. *"The Tannaitic period did not even know the suffering Messiah"*, Klausner claimed. On the first century Rabbis he said that, *"they certainly believed in the possibility of a coming deliverance, but without any personal savior"*. The concept of the "Son of Man" refers in his opinion also to the nation of Israel. Klausner's attitudes were, however, a result of his being a supporter of "prophetic Zionism" represented by a Jewish philosopher **Ahad Ha-Am**, the leader of Hibbat Zion movement, who anticipated the foundation of a prosperous welfare state on the earth.

The Rabbinical exegesis about the Suffering Servant as a nation was gradually received as the common and accepted interpretation. But what do we learn from later legitimate Rabbinic sources? We must remember that in Jewish exegesis the later sources have often more weight than the earlier traditions although it has to be argued with Talmudic maxims. The old Jewish interpretation about the Messiah as Ephraim the son of Joseph, or the people of Israel, had become apparently a kind of **"evasive move"** to avoid the Christian understanding of the Suffering Servant.

Even the educational text-books in Israeli school-system present this popular explanation that Isaiah 53 speaks of the people of Israel, who has suffered on behalf of the other nations *in order to atone for their sins*. The prescriptions for the atoning sacrifices state however that the offering ought to be without blemish (See **Lapide Pinchas E.**, Jesus in Israeli School Books, Journal of Ecum. Stud. X,1973).

Isaiah 52:13-15 contains the most shocking paradox in the whole history of redemption: "See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and

highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him - his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness". The **Targum** comments on this verse, saying that *"this is how my servant the Messiah will act wisely"*. On the other hand, however, it interprets the following verses as meaning Israel. The **Midrash Tanhuma** from the ninth century and the later **Yalkut Shimeoni** says that *"this is the King, the Messiah, who will rise and be greatly exalted, higher than Abraham, greater than Moses, above the worshiping angels."* **RaDaK** for his part concludes that *"this chapter depicts Israel in its dispersion"*. **Rabbi Elia de Vidas**, who was active in Safed in Palestine in the 16th century, says: *"Thus the Messiah suffered on account of our sins, and was wounded; He who does not wish the Messiah to be wounded for our transgressions may choose himself to suffer and carry his own sins."*

The well-known **Rabbi Moses Alshekh** who was also living in Safed in the late 16th century wrote on Isaiah 53: *"Our ancient Sages have preserved for us the witness of tradition that this refers to the Messiah. For this reason we too, following them, should consider the subject of this prophecy to be David, the Messiah, who will appear in this way."* In this sense, however, the rabbinic exegesis of various periods do not have a real consensus.

The oldest traditions about Isaiah 53 in the Talmud, the Midrash and the Zohar

There are some important observations which give a new background on the discussions about the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. **Talmud Sanhedrin** 43a relates the tradition about Yeshu to **R. Abbaye**, an *Amora of the second generation* between 250 and 290 C.E. It mentions twice that Jesus was hanged "on the eve of Passover". The Zohar combines Isaiah 53 to the *person of the Messiah* by two noted Rabbis **Simeon Bar Yohai** and his son **Eleasar** *from the Tannaitic period* between 150 and 200 C.E. **Simeon** or simply **Yohai** was the student of the outstanding Tanna Rabbi **Akiba** before 135 C.E. In this sense they built in many things a commonly accepted tradition. The famous prof. **Jeremias** insisted in 1930s that the Palestinian Jewry of the Second Temple saw the Messianic motif in Isaiah 53. The Rabbinic Messianic expectation has thus often a wider span of thoughts than the commonly accepted theology can give.

I found about 25 years ago that even **Midrash Ruth** speaks about Isaiah 53 in the context of the Messianic banquet. It repeats four times that one who eats the piece of bread in this world will eat it also "in the Messianic age and in the World to Come". This *"pat lehem"*, the morsel, is "the bread of kingdom", because the Messiah "will rain down manna" upon his people. And Boaz said, "Dip your morsel in the vinegar", this refers to the sufferings of the Messiah, because it is written in Isaiah 53:5, *"he was wounded because of our transgressions"*. That supports the impression of Jeremias. Its tradition is based on the teaching of **R. Jonathan**, a contemporary of **R. Yohai b. Hanina**, a Tanna of the 4th generation between **135 and 170 A.D.** According to the words of prof. **Myron Bialik Lerner** his study of Midrash Ruth was the first Midrash essay made in Eretz Israel. Lerner summarizes his reference related to the New Testament saying: "The Gospels are seemingly reflecting the same old mode of eloquence which was *commonly used in the first Christian century or after it.*

A similar style in the original layer of Midrash Ruth seems to indicate that we have there a sermon *from the period of Tannaim*."

The Talmud touches indirectly upon Isaiah 53 as we have seen when it speaks about the cryptic name of the Messiah, *the "Hivrah" or "leper"*. The very fact that the Messianic expectation of the earliest Midrashim and the Talmud associates it with Isaiah 53, witnesses to its Messianic character.

The Zohar tradition, which is one of the comparatively less censored Rabbinic sources, offers its own material on the Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53. According to the Zohar, the Messiah owned a little hut in the Garden of Eden called the "bird's nest", and when he lifted up his eyes and saw that "the patriarchs entered into the Temple of God, which had been destroyed" and that "Rachel had tears on her cheeks", *"then he raised his voice and wept so much that the Garden shook and all the Righteous who were there with him lamented and wept with him"*. The Paradise refers to the realm of death. It mentions always some verses of Isaiah 53.

Related to this "Paradise" there is also a discussion in **Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah, Par. 12** that at the same time as Israel was building the Temple, *the Holy One commanded his angels to make "a booth in Paradise for the youth whose name is Metatron, so that he might transmit the souls of the Righteous to God in order to atone for the sins of Israel committed in their dispersal"*.

The Zohar is not a pure tradition from the first Christian centuries. However, it received a place of honor beside the Talmud in both Eastern and Western Judaism. It mirrors the inner movements in the heart of Judaism. One of the **Zohar's** thoughts on Isaiah 53 speaks about the Messiah as follows: "The departed souls will arrive and tell the Messiah (about their lives), and when they describe to him the sufferings which Israel is undergoing in her dispersion, that they are guilty because they do not wish to know their LORD, he will raise up his voice and weep on behalf of those who are guilty of this, as it is written: *'He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.'* -- There is a castle in the Garden which is called the *'house of the sick'*. In that day the Messiah will enter into that castle and will shout, 'May all the sickness and pains of Israel come upon me!' and they will come. *If he did not relieve Israel's pains and take them upon himself, no-one would be able to suffer on behalf of Israel's oppression, of which it is written in the Torah: And it is written: 'In truth, he did bear our sicknesses'.*"

As we can see, both the Zohar as well as the Talmud are depicting the Messiah as a pre-existent figure who shares and carries the sufferings and even the sins of Israel in her dispersion. The Soncino translation of the Zohar from **Section 2, page 212a** uses in its interpretation about Isaiah 53 the word "expiation": *"There he calls for all the diseases and pains and sufferings of Israel, bidding them settle on himself, which they do. And were it not that he thus eases the burden from Israel, taking it on himself, no one could endure the sufferings meted out to Israel in expiation on account of their neglect of the Torah. So Scripture says; 'Surely our diseases he did bear'.*"

After this description the Zohar is making the following statement: *"As long as Israel were in the Holy Land, by means of the Temple service and sacrifices they averted all*

evil diseases and afflictions from the world. Now it is the Messiah who is the means of averting them from mankind until the time when a man quits this world and receives his punishment." The New Testament interprets Isaiah 53 as referring to Jesus. This seems to indicate that this chapter was treated Messianically at least by some Jews at the time when the New Testament was written.

Isaiah 53 is also quoted **in the Zohar** without mentioning the word Messiah, relating the sufferings to a righteous believer. **Section I, page 140a** tells that *"God finds delight in the righteous, He brings upon them sufferings, as it is written: 'Yet it pleased the LORD to crush him by disease' (53:10)."* In the **Section III, page 218a** there is also a similar observation: *"When God desires to give healing to the world He smites one righteous man among them with disease and suffering, and through him gives healing to all, as it is written, 'But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities and with his stripes we are healed' (Isaiah 53:5)."*

All this indicates that the Suffering Servant points in Jewish literature both to the nation of Israel, to the person of the Messiah and to the lot of the righteous man in this world. And the idea of the atoning death of the Messiah is often included in these interpretations.

Both RaSHI, RaDaK and Ibn Ezra saw in Isaiah 53 the son of Joseph, Ephraim. In fact, although **RaSHI**, Rabbi Solomon Yitzhaki (1040-1105), applied the Suffering Servant of the LORD to the Jewish nation. There were also other modes of interpretation among medieval Sages. The explanation of RaSHI was rejected as unsatisfactory by **Maimonides**, who lived between 1135 and 1204 and is still regarded by Jews as of highest authority. According to **R. Mosheh Cohen Iben Crispin** of Cordoba (fourteenth century) RaSHI *"distorted the passage from its natural meaning"* and in truth it was given by God as a description of the Messiah himself. In this interpretation *"the doors of the literal interpretation of this Parashah were shut in their face"*.

Isaiah 53 in Jewish prayer literature

Isaiah 53 has been totally omitted from the annual reading of the prophets, so called *haphtaroth*. In **Yalkut Makhiri** also there is a note in brackets relating to Isaiah 53 that "here is missing a little of the matter". However, on the Great Day of Atonement the Jew feels that his sins must be forgiven before God. On that day Isaiah 53 is sometimes mentioned in the Jewish prayers.

A separate prayerbook for the feast days, the **Mahzor Rabbah**, contains a remarkable literary prayer by **Rabbi Eleazar Qalir** which may be from the sixth century AD. It is often heard in the Synagogue. The prayer begins poetically: "At that time, *before the creation*, he already set up the oasis and the Yinnon" - the word 'oasis' refers to the Temple, and 'Yinnon' to the Branch, the Messiah (**Psalm 72:17** in Hebrew). The main body of the prayer reads as follows: "Then, *before the creation*, he already set up the Temple and the Messiah (the Rabbis' interpretation) - the *Messiah our Righteousness* has turned away from us, we are shaken, and can find no-one who can *justify* us. The yoke of our sins and our transgressions is a burden to us; and *he was wounded for our transgressions, he suffered on his shoulders our iniquities*; there

is forgiveness for our sins. *In his wounds we are healed*; it is time to create for ever a *new creation*. *Send him back from the circles*, bring him back from Seir, so that we might hear him in Lebanon a second time through Yinnon. He is our God, our Father, our King, he is our Savior and he will liberate and redeem us for a *second time* and let us hear of his grace a *second time* in everyone's sight, as it is said: *I will save you at the end* as at the beginning so that I will be your God."

This prayer, which is couched in somewhat enigmatic language, says that the "**Messiah Our Righteousness**" has turned away from his people. Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon combines the term Messiah with the concept Son of Man. Although the person praying is thoroughly shaken, he recognizes that the Messiah has already carried his burdens. Therefore forgiveness is to be found through the fulfillment of Isaiah 53. In this way a "*new creation*" is effected. The idea of the "*circle*" is set out by the prayer book itself as meaning "*the circles of the earth*". "*Seir*" is a secret name for Rome, the center of Christianity, and in which, according to the Talmud, the Messiah sits "with the poor and the sick". "*Lebanon*" means the Temple, which "*whitens*" the people's sins by their sacrifices, as it's root *laban* is the equivalent of "*white*". The one praying repeats that God will save his people a "*second time*".

As a final conclusion we may say that the Rabbinic Messianic expectation has a wider span of thoughts than it is commonly accepted. For us is sufficient to remember: "*Surely*, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows"! This is also enough for all despised and unworthy people.