

Corporeality in Jewish Thought and Art

by Mordechai Lewy

Zusammenfassung

Im Essay werden Körperlichkeit und Spiritualität als dichotomes Begriffspaar im Judentum (und Islam) gegenüber dem Christentum verglichen. Im Geschichtsverlauf wurden bei beiden Religionen Abweichungen von den sogenannten normativen Glaubenssätzen festgestellt. Diese können sowohl auf gegenseitige Beeinflussung (Anpassung durch Konfrontation im Mittelalter zwischen Judentum und Christentum) wie auch auf externe Akkulturationsprozesse (Hellenisierungsprozess im antiken Judentum) zurückgeführt werden. Es entsteht ein dynamisches Wechselspiel, wobei in der christlichen Kunst eine allmähliche Verkörperlichung stattfindet, während sich die jüdische Religiosität und der Kunstausdruck auf eine Vergeistigung festlegen. Eine eigenständige jüdische Kunstsprache und Ikonographie konnte allerdings erst nach einem gewissen Assimilationsgrad und Säkularisierungsprozess entstehen. Bei Marc Chagall hatte sie ihre erste Reife erreicht.

Abstract

The essay compares the dichotomous concepts of corporeality and spirituality in Judaism and Christianity. Through the ages, deviations from normative principles of beliefs could be discerned in both religions. These can be attributed either to the somewhat confrontational interaction between Jews and Christians in the Medieval urban environment or to the impact of Hellenic civilization on both monotheistic religions. Out of this dynamic impact emerged Christian art with a predilection to expressed corporeality, whereas Jewish religiosity found its artistic expression in a spiritual non-iconographical mode. A genuine Jewish art and iconography could develop only after a certain degree of assimilation and secularization. Marc Chagall was the first protagonist of a mature expression of Jewish iconography.

Introduction

Corporeality among Jews, as opposed to spirituality in Christianity, has for centuries been the subject of numerous polemics, which sometimes ended disastrously for the Jews. My intention in writing this essay is not to overload the cycle of polemics. Rather, I would like to illuminate spots that can moderate the polarization created over the centuries. Neither Judaism nor Christianity always adhered fully to corporeality or spirituality, respectively. At times, we

find Jews shaping their belief by adopting Hellenistic philosophy, such as Philo of Alexandria, or even Aristotelian concepts of afterlife, such as Maimonides. The Jewish Kabbala developed a very corporeal understanding of God, including the idea of reincarnation of the soul. Most Christians understood God as a corporeal entity by adopting the idea of incarnation, as the word became flesh. The idea of transubstantiation was conducive to the veneration of Corpus Christi established since 1264. Christian art became corporeal as more naturalistic depictions were required to disseminate this new doctrine. Still, in spite of borrowing from each other, Jews and Christians remained faithful to their own truth. Jewish attitudes towards corporeality will be dealt with according to parameters which touch upon basic fundamentals of belief and rites.

The first is the concept of the invisible, bodiless and omnipresent God. The second is the belief that man was created with body and soul, which are one. The third is the corporeal bonds to God in the Jewish male body. The fourth is the new medieval sensitivity of the painful body among Jews and Christians alike. The ultimate point is, why did Jewish corporeality prevent, and why did Christian spirituality allow for the development of figurative art.

The Jewish belief in invisible, bodiless and omnipresent God

God's covenant was made, not only with the Hebrew nation physically present in Sinai, but also with future generations.¹ The ark and, later, the temple in Jerusalem were considered the dwelling of God. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, the divine presence was dispersed among the Jewish people – referred to in the Talmud as the *Shekhina*.² The script became the medium for the omnipresence of the Divine. Tangible offerings were sublimated into words and in daily prayers.³ This idea of divine omnipresence befits well the Jewish concept of God invisible, which is devoid of its own body or corporeality.

Among the summaries of principles of belief, the thirteen principles written by Maimonides⁴ were considered in high esteem. Out of the Thirteen, the first three are relevant:

¹ *Deuteronomy*, 29:13-14.

² In the 12th century, the *Shekhina* appears however in the kabbalistic book *Bahir* as a female assistant to God.

³ *Babylonian Talmud, Brachot Tractate*, 26b: R. Joshua b. Levi says: «The Prayers were instituted to replace the daily sacrifices».

⁴ They were originally attached to his exegesis of the Mishnaic *Sanhedrin Tractate*, in the introduction to chapter 10 (*Halak*). At the beginning of the 14th century those principles

1. «Exalted be the Living God and praised, He exists – unbounded by time is His existence»;
2. «**He is one – and there is no unity like His oneness – Inscrutable and infinite is His oneness**»;
3. «He has no semblance of a body nor is He corporeal – nor has His holiness any comparison. **God is one, is invisible and omnipresence and has no corporeality**».

Maimonides' principles caused a rift in the rabbinic world in the middle Ages. One of the earliest critics who was close to Kabbalist circles was Rabbi Moses ben Hasdai Taku.⁵ He did not accept Maimonides' allegorical interpretation of anthropomorphic language, in which the biblical text in the Pentateuch attributes voices to God. For Rabbi Moses, God's power was infinite and he could «minimize» himself, appear at random and likewise make noises at will. Mainstream Judaism continues to consider God invisible and omnipresent. It never supported ideas of reincarnation of the soul (*Gilgul Neshamot*); it even utterly rejected it.⁶ With the emerging impact of the Kabbala during the 12th and 13th centuries, the idea of reincarnation of the soul became part of Jewish mysticism.

The body and soul in human creation

The different attitude towards incarnation in Judaism and Christianity has its roots in the manner of interpreting humanity's creation. Of utmost importance for Judaism was the monist concept of the human creature, which means soul and body were created as a unity. The Hebrew term for soul *Nefesh* is almost synonymous with man and life. As they are one, man brings his body into the relationship with God. On the other hand, God confirms this corporeality by including the body in his covenant through circumcision. The original biblical monism is the source of Jewish corporeality. The Hellenistic dualism, i.e. the separation of soul and body, seems to be the source of Christian spirituality. This Hellenistic idea, however, also had an impact on various Jewish movements during the Second Temple period. Philo of Alexandria is considered the main protagonist of it in Jewish philosophy. For him, the body

were integrated into the daily Prayer Yigdal by the poet Daniel ben Judah Dayan from Rome.

⁵ *Ktav Tamim*, Facsimile of the BN Paris Manuscript published by Prof. Josef Dan, Jerusalem 1994.

⁶ Saadia Gaon, *Emunot Vedeot*, Book 8, Chapter 6.

is almost a prison of the soul. In the Talmud, a certain Antoninus appears numerous times having a dialogue with a certain Rabi Yehuda – obviously the highly respected president of the Sanhedrin. This reflects a legitimacy to exchange views with Greek philosophy. Is it too much to ask that Antoninus represent an emperor of the Antonine dynasty – probably even Marcus Aurelius himself? Some Jewish sages felt challenged and objected to Hellenistic impact. One bone of contention was the issue of circumcision. In the Talmud, some sages made the distinction that, after death, the human creature decomposes to its three parts. The soul is from God, who takes (back) what belonged to him. The whiteness is from the male, from which the brain and bones are made. The redness comes from the female, from which the skin, flesh and blood are made. The parts originating from male and female fall in decay after death.⁷ Death separates body and soul temporarily until resurrection.⁸ There is hardly more moving a description of resurrection than Ezekiel's Vision of the Dry Bones.⁹ Jews adopted burial customs in order to prepare the human body for future resurrection. The entire body has to be buried within that same day. Cremation is not allowed. The integrity of the body has to be maintained, in spite of the mortal decay, since upon resurrection the body will reemerge alive.

Who has not seen, after every suicide bombing among civilian casualties in Israel, Orthodox Jews collecting every bodily remain, be they so widely dispersed on the site of the terrorist attack, in order to keep the limbs of the body as complete as possible before burial. These efforts are indeed justified if you believed in the resurrection of the body in its entirety. It may not have been agreed upon by Maimonides. He was much contested by Jewish sages of his time (1135-1204) and even regarded by some as heretic just because he pleaded for a separation of the soul from the body after death.¹⁰

The corporeal bonds to God among Jews

There is hardly any stronger corporeal expression than God's demand¹¹ from Abraham and to all of his offspring to perform the rite of circumcision (*Brit*

⁷ *Jerusalem Talmud, Quilayim Tractat*, 8:4, 31b, in E.E. Urbach, *The Sages – Their concepts and beliefs*, Jerusalem 1971, 193-194 [in Hebrew].

⁸ Bynum Caroline W., *The resurrection of the body in Western Christianity 200-1336*, New York 1995, 24-25 & 54-55.

⁹ *Ezekiel* 37:5-10.

¹⁰ Maimonides, *MishneTorah, Sefer Hamada*, Book 6 (The laws of Repentance), 8:2.

¹¹ *Genesis*, 17:13.

Mila) upon their flesh as the sign of the covenant. Another corporeal bond, which is repeated daily by observant Jews, is to bind the phylacteries (*tefilin*) on the forehead (*totafot*) and on the left arm – the one near to the heart (*ot*).¹² This is an additional expression of corporeality, which embraces God's corporate ownership of every individual Jew as his servant or slave.¹³ The Jewish male body bears permanent marks (circumcision) and temporary marks (daily binding of phylacteries) as mnemonic signs in order to remember God's benevolence since the exodus from Egypt [see picture no. 1]. But we can add an anthropological significance to those body marks. It seems that they reflect the evolution from ancient socio-legal patterns of marking property.

Ancient oriental cultures used to mark ownership on the body of property, be it object, animal or human body. The permanent status of slavery in Mesopotamian cultures was marked rather by tattoos than by brand marks.¹⁴ The Bible resented permanent body marks, such as tattooing.¹⁵ I would suggest that *tefilin* was introduced as a substitute to permanent body marks, which slaves used to have. The purpose of prohibiting tattoo marks was to draw a distinction between the new monotheist religion and the polytheist cultures of the region. Maimonides made this clear again in the 13th century.¹⁶ Circumcision, nevertheless, continued to be practiced by Jews. Beyond them only Egyptians and Canaanites people were accustomed to this habit.¹⁷ There is no linguistic or any other evidence that Mesopotamian cultures practiced circumcision.¹⁸ Therefore, the Mesopotamian tradition of Abraham's circumcision seems to me doubtful. It was probably useful to hide the impact the Hebrew were owing to Egyptian culture. Hellenism probably inherited the Babylonian – Persian habit to resent circumcision. Under the influence of Hellenism, the practice of circumcision was no longer followed by all Jews, and it was not uncommon to restore the foreskin. Greek-Roman culture resented circumcision, as it was regarded as a mutilation of the beauty of the body.¹⁹

¹² *Exodus*, 13:9.

¹³ *Leviticus* 25:55.

¹⁴ *Laws of Eshmunna*, 51-52; *Codex Hammurabi*, 146, 226-227.

¹⁵ *Leviticus*, 19:28.

¹⁶ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, *Sefer Hamada*, Book 4 (*Laws on Idols and Idolators*), 12:11.

¹⁷ *Jeremiah*, 9:14; Herodotos, *Historia*, II:104.

¹⁸ Holma Harri. *Die Namen Der Koerperteile Im Assyrisch-Babylonischen*, Leipzig 1911.

¹⁹ Herodotos, *Historia*, II:37.



Fig. 1: Use of phylacteries, Marc Chagall, "The praying Jew" (1923), Art Institute of Chicago.

The cult of the painful body – the sensitivity of Medieval corporeality among Jews and Christians

The mnemo-techniques employed in ancient Judaism by body marks had a bright future ahead of them during medieval Christianity. The organic view of the community as one body in communion with Jesus had been shaped in the New Testament. The idea of God (the Word or Logos) becoming flesh (i.e. taking human shape) was indeed not alien to Hellenistic, Egyptian or Meso-

potamian traditions. At the same time, the divine and human nature of Jesus became a binding doctrine in the first Council of Nicaea in 325. Early Christianity adopted customs that were analogous to Jewish culture, but on a symbolical level and not a corporeal one. The best example is baptism as the rite of initiation. Analogous to circumcision, baptism creates an indelible mark, but rather on the soul and not on human skin. The contrast between Jewish corporeality and Christian spirituality has been sharpened by polemics among the two religions, the earliest probably as far back as in the Mishna. Rabbi Eliezar Hamodai said in Pirkei Avot that those who cancel Abraham's covenant «has no share in the world next to come».²⁰ Augustine expressed this polemic polarization by asserting that Christians have a deeper understanding of spiritual meaning, whereas Jews remain in the «lower» realm of understanding carnality only in its physical or material form.²¹ Nevertheless, circumcision was regarded also by Augustine as a kind of seal of salvation.²² Circumcision however, was understood by Petrus Lombardus as a mere mark, since Abraham was already justified through faith.²³ Relying on Augustine, Lombardus considered circumcision since the time of Abraham as a remedy against original sin, which is inherited to each generation through the concupiscence of our parents.

In Christian iconography since the 13th century, the Jewish rite of circumcision appears often in the cycle of Jesus' life, mostly without negative undertones [see picture no. 2]. Since the 13th century, Christian religious sentiments included an emerging corporeality to be expressed by figurative art. The cult of body marks consequently increased, be it the veneration of Corpus Christi, the five wounds of Jesus, the stigmatization of Franciscus or the veneration of Arma Christi. The Imitatio Christi became the corporeal ideal of mystic religiosity in the late medieval period. Blood changed its normative significance, as opposed to the Bible, in which blood was associated with life, purity and prosperity. The Kabbala embraced different and contradictory meanings. For both medieval Christians and Jews, the body of God, and especially his blood, stood in the center of a new sense of corporeality. Both participated in the cult of God's blood, as David Biale puts it.²⁴ The Christians, induced by their belief in the sacrament of the Eucharist, were keen on multiplying miracles of

²⁰ Rabbi Eliezer Hamodai, *Mishna, Pirkei Avot*, 3:12; *Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Tzav*, Homily 14.

²¹ Augustine, *Adversus Iudaeos*, VII, 9.

²² Augustine, *On the Gospel of St. John*, tractate 30, 4-5.

²³ Petrus Lombardus, *Sententiae*, II:7; II,9.

²⁴ Biale, David, *Blood and Belief – The circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians*, Berkely 2008, p. 93.

the bleeding host, which served mainly to convince common believers of the doctrine of transubstantiation. But the miracles were diverted easily to blood labels against Jews, which made the miracles of the bleeding host more plausible in popular Christian belief [see picture no. 3].



Fig. 2: "Circumcision of Christ" (15th century), Musée Condé, Chantilly, Ms.35 (1455), fol. 29v.



Fig. 3: Paolo Uccello, “*Miracolo dell’Ostia profanata*” (1465-1469), *second part of predella, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.*

On the Jewish part, blood played a major role in the rite of circumcision. In addition, Jews lived under immanent tension, forced to spill their own blood as martyrs in times of pogroms when they refused to convert. The Jewish trauma of massacring their own children, once having faced the peril of intoxicated mobs inspired by crusading ideas, did not fail to impress their Christians neighbors. Jacob Yuval suggested that if Jews were able to kill their own children, so the Christians might have thought, Jews are likely to perform any ritual crime, such as using the blood of Christian children.²⁵ No doubt, Jews and Christians in medieval towns shared a corporeality which was a product of cohabitation in a densely built urban environment. They had learned each others’ rites, but being competitors for God’s benevolence, it did not reduce their animosity. Jews and Christians rather interpreted or mocked the others’ rite and, by doing so, both had their share in a cycle of polemics. The only difference was that Jews were a minority not only risking their lives, but being brand marked with deeply – rooted prejudices.

²⁵ Yuval Israel Jacob, *Two Nations in your womb – Perceptions of Jews and Christians*, Tel Aviv 2001, pp. 175-218 (Hebr.).

Body gesture in Jewish and Christian liturgies

As liturgy should be considered as the body language of belief, one could trace similarities and differences between Jewish and Christian corporal gestures in their respective liturgies. In the *Actus paenitentialis* at the beginning of every Mass, the believer knocks three times with the right fist on the left side of his chest where his heart is located, while saying «*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa maxima*». The same body gesture is used mainly by Ashkenazi [Central European] Jews in the daily prayer of *Vidui* [Confession] on each of the 24 sins which are enumerated. Without knowing which religion adapted the gesture first; it was most likely introduced in the Middle Ages. When the Torah scroll is taken out of the Holy Ark, the community stands up in the synagogue. Similarly, during the *Liturgia Verbi* while reading the Evangelium, the community in the church stands up. The Evangelium receives similar dignity as the Torah scroll, as both are exhibited in procession around the Holy Ark or respectively the Altar.²⁶ Whereas the Evangelium is adored from far, Jews seek physical proximity to the Torah scroll during the procession and kiss it with the tassels of twisted cords (*Zizit*) on the corner of their upper garment (*Talith*).²⁷ The same drive of physical contact is shown among Jews at the beginning and at the end of any reading from the Torah scroll. Christian liturgy however has also developed its own genuine expression of corporeality. The linen cloth on the altar, on which the Eucharist vessels are placed, has been called the corporal since the 14th century, as this linen is used to embrace the body of Christ during the Eucharist liturgy. Marking the cross by the fingers on objects, on one's own body or in the air created a vast diversity in liturgical gestures. Such were the five wounds of Jesus symbolized by the fivefold marking of the cross on the consecrated host,²⁸ which was already regarded as the body of Christ. The Spanish baroque produced devotional wooden sculptures, which were painted so naturalistic that they were called *encarnacion*²⁹ (becoming flesh). This post-Tridentine art made the doctrine of the word becoming flesh extremely visible.

²⁶ The Holy Ark is opened while *Numbers* 10:35 is recited, alluding to the procession of the ark during the battles in the desert.

²⁷ The tassels of twisted cords or threads on the corners of the upper garment (*talith*) worn by strict Jews as commanded in *Deuteronomy*, 22:12.

²⁸ This gesture was practiced in the Tridentine mass until 1962.

²⁹ *The Sacred made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600-1700*, National Gallery, London 2009.

Jewish Corporeality did not endorse images – Christian spirituality promoted corporeal images

The Pentateuch had already reflected an iconoclast attitude in prohibiting the making of images.³⁰ Jews later developed the ability to sublime corporeality into immateriality, such as turning offerings to prayers. Canonized words and script strengthened the attitudes of non-pictorial artistic expression. As in Islamic art, it resulted in ornamental design and micrography [see picture no. 4]. Establishing an almost imageless culture under Muslim rule amounted to breaking up the classical Greco-Roman tradition of pictorial expression, which had dominated the Mediterranean basin since antiquity.³¹ Christianity went in other directions when it sublimed spirituality of the word into God's incarnation through Jesus. Because of this corporeality, Christianity could easily adopt patterns of pictorial art from within the Greco-Roman tradition.

As the Episode of the Golden Calf may illustrate, that habits of worshipping idols were not easy to eradicate throughout biblical periods. Under Hellenistic influence, mosaics in synagogues in Holy Land were designed with iconographic programs of biblical scenes. The richness of biblical images in the frescos of the Dura-Europos synagogue from the 3rd century is unique [see picture no. 5].



Fig. 4: Hebrew micrograph turns figurative, South German Hebrew Bible (1304), Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris, Hebr. 10, fol. 85v.

³⁰ *Exodus*, 20:4; *Deuteronomy* 4:16-18.

³¹ Belting Hans, *Florenz und Bagdad- Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks*, München 2008, S. 72.



Fig. 5: Scenes from Book Esther, Dura Europos Synagogue (244-256), tempera over plaster, original in National Museum, Damascus, reconstruction in Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

Hellenistic culture did endorse images as truth, as expressed by Philostratos.³² The Greek term for painting is indeed zoographia, i.e. drawing or writing the life. Plato opposed painting (and sophistry) in his dialogue Phaedrus, as neither one of them could create life and truth.³³ Plato believed that only the soul and its truth can create life. The platonic reservations against painting exist also in the Muslim traditions of Hadiths.³⁴ Hostility towards images has been maintained by and large by Jews and Muslim alike. In his polemics against the iconoclastic approach, John of Damascus argued that, because Jesus had become the incarnation of the divine word, he could be depicted.

Beda Venerabilis tried to harmonize Old and New Testament attitudes by interpreting the Old Testament as pre-figuration to the New Testament.³⁵ Bedas' views became the main concept in medieval Christian art. The emergence of corporeality in Christian art was almost a didactic necessity. Visual communication was and is until today in the service of propagating the Catholic faith, as seeing amounts to believing. This basic image – friendly approach of Catholicism – is not identical with the Byzantine icon- friendly (iconodul) attitude. William Durand (1220-1296) made clear that «it is one thing to adore a picture, another by means of a picture historically to learn what should be adored».³⁶ The Church doctors were well aware that in medieval polemics with Jews and Muslim, Christianity was regarded almost as idolatry. The main argument was that, if Jesus was only human, veneration of his image was idolatry and not worth being depicted. If, however, Jesus became God it was impossible to depict him due to his invisibility. The new doctrine of transubstantiation and Corpus Christi veneration called for a propagation among believers who, without visible miracles, had difficulties comprehending such doctrines. Maimonides defined Christianity in his classification of five infidelities as follows: «one who admits that there is a single God but that He has a body and form».³⁷

The medium best preserved in Jewish medieval art are the illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts of the Ashkenazi provenience. What strikes one when looking at them are the figurative depictions of animals and human creatures.

³² Philostratos, *Imagines*, Book 1.

³³ Plato, *Phaedrus* : «writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence».

³⁴ Paret Rudi, *Textbelege zum islamischen Bildverbot*, in *Das Werk des Künstlers – Festschrift Schrade*, Stuttgart 1960, 36-37.

³⁵ Beda Venerabilis, *De Templo Salomonis*, cap. 19.

³⁶ William Durandus, *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, Book I, as translated in Holt G.Elizabeth, *A documentary History of Art*, I, New York 1957, 121.

³⁷ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, Book 8 (*The Law of Repentance*), 3:7.

How can we reconcile this fact with the Jewish iconoclastic approach? Maimonides wrote in Mishne Torah: «It is permitted to benefit from figures made by gentiles for decoration, but those made for idol-worship are forbidden».³⁸ The accepted view nowadays is that such manuscripts were produced in cooperation with Jewish scribes and Christian illuminators. The often bizarre and distorted creatures did respond basically to the Jewish sponsors' request not to depict human species [see picture no. 6]. However, even if we don't have to go as far as Ruth Melnikoff went,³⁹ the Jews seem in their opposition to human images to have overlooked those illustrations. Looking at Hebrew manuscripts from Italian or Spanish provenience, one misses this kind of deliberate human deformation. I exclude the possibility that in those countries, Jewish painters were engaged. If we take the norms prescribed⁴⁰ by Maimonides towards idols, painting and sculpturing could not be a Jewish profession. Only the process of assimilation into a gentile society, such as happened in parts of Europe during the late 19th century, could bring a radical change. It took almost 800 years after Maimonides for Marc Chagall to create for the first time ever a genuine Jewish figurative art.

³⁸ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, Book 7 (*The Laws of Idol-worship and its regulations*), 7:6.

³⁹ Melnikoff Ruth, *Antisemitic Hate Signs in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts from Medieval Germany*, Jerusalem 1999, p. 58: «the artists did so to please themselves by expressing their hatred».

⁴⁰ Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, Book 7, 8:4.



Fig. 6: Illustrating Jews before the gates of Paradise from Bird's Head Haggadah, (c. 1300), Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Ms. 180/57, fol. 33r.