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“*Sèdeq sèdeq tirdòf*
justice, justice, you will pursue”
(Dt 16:20)

“Justice! Seek justice if you want to live...” were the words that Moses addressed to the children of Israel before they entered the land of Canaan. He knew that he would not be able to participate in this new phase of Jewish history because the end of his days was approaching and with solicitous solicitude he imparted his last teaching, such as: “Appoint judges and secretaries for your tribes in every city which Yahweh gives you, that they may judge the people according to justice. You shall not bend the law or show partiality. Do not accept gifts because gifts blind the eyes of the wise and subvert the cause of the *saddiqim* righteous. Justice! Seek justice if you want to live and inherit the land which Yahweh, your God, gives you” (Dt 16:18-20).

Ha-Shem/God underlined the importance of justice so that his people would stay on the right path and receive his blessing. But the *sedaqah* before being a political and social ideal was a divine attribute, together with that of *rahamim*, mercy. Psalm 145[144] defines God as King, *Mèlekh* (v. 1), gracious and merciful, *hanum* and *rahum* (v. 8-9), just, *saddiq*. “The Lord Ha-Shem is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings” (v. 17). If there were only justice, the world would not last, not even if there were only mercy. The history of civilizations is situated in the dialectic between the two.

The *sedaqah* is not external conformity to the Torah, but an intimate and trusting relationship with Ha-Shem, of which the observance of the *miswot* is the outward expression. It is the *penimiyut*, interiority, which gives value to *hisoniyut*, the exteriority: which makes that visible.

Sedeq sedeq tirdof: why is the word justice repeated twice? Since no word in the Torah is superfluous, there must be a reason for a word to appear twice. Perhaps, the reason is that we need time for reflection, to ask ourselves whether what we are pursuing is really justice, and not something else that appears to be such.

I should like to present to you for reflection: the life and work of two upright men of the twentieth century: Simon Wiesenthal and Jules Isaac.

Simon Wiesenthal (Bučač 1908 — Vienna 2005) was born in Galicia, Poland. Galicia was the land inhabited by those *hassidim* so well described by Martin Buber, who were led by great *saddiqim*, people who dedicated their lives to the *sedaqah*. After graduating in engineering from the University of Prague he lived with his wife, Cyla Müller, in Lviv which, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was occupied by the USSR. When the Reich invaded the USSR in 1941, Wiesenthal and his family were captured by the Germans and sent to various concentration camps and extermination camps, but escaped death on several occasions. On 5 May 1945 he was freed by US forces at Mauthausen. On his release, he began collecting information for suits

against Nazi crimes. Realizing that he could not return to Poland, Wiesenthal moved to Austria and with some other volunteers he founded the "Hebrew Documentation Center" in Linz. Thus began an activity that was to continue for almost 60 years, until 2003, when Wiesenthal announced his retirement.

The information Wiesenthal collected was of fundamental importance for the capture, in Argentina, of Adolf Eichmann, the main organizer of the *Endlösung*, and of Karl Silberbauer, the Gestapo sergeant responsible for the arrest of Anne Frank, of Franz Stangl, the commander of the death camps of Treblinka and Sobibor, and many others. However, he failed to bring to justice Alois Brunner, Eichmann's main collaborator, who spent his days in Syria, protected by the regime.

"None of you will live to bear testimony, but even if someone escapes, the world will not believe him. Perhaps there will be suspicion, discussion, research by historians, but there will be no certainty, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some evidence remains, and some of you survive, people will say that the facts you report are too monstrous to be believed. They will say that they are exaggerated allied propaganda, and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We are the ones who will dictate the history of the camps". This speech Wiesenthal heard from his jailers, and it is also reported by Primo Levi.¹ Remembering, bearing witness, was the duty that Levi had assumed towards the victims. Wiesenthal considered it his duty to pursue justice.

It is necessary to keep this context in mind in order to try to understand the flame that animated Wiesenthal's life and to approach the problem raised in his book *Die Sonnenblume*, [*The Sunflower*]. Wiesenthal was a prisoner in a concentration camp near Lviv. One day they were ordered to go to the Polytechnic, where Wiesenthal had studied, now transformed into a military hospital. They had to carry large cement bins, scattered around the yard, filled to the brim with blood-stained bandages. At one point a nurse came up to him and asked him whether he was Jewish? Wiesenthal was very surprised: dressed as he was, what else could he have been? She then took him inside the building, down staircases and along corridors that reminded him of his student days in Wiesenthal. They entered a room where in the semi-darkness he gradually made out a white bed, a bedside table and something white that looked at him from the bed-covers. It was a young man of 22, about to die, an S.S. who tells him about his life and wants his forgiveness, wants to be forgiven by a Jew. In particular concerning an action he had carried out: 150-200 people were locked in a house crying, screaming and moaning. The house was set on fire, everyone died. In the evening, brandy was distributed to the soldiers to help them to forget. Wiesenthal was assailed by a thousand thoughts and among others he feared that he would be missed, and be severely punished for his absence. He left the room without saying a word.

In the concentration camp death was a daily happening: when new prisoners arrived the old prisoners were liquidated, throughout the barracks, to make room for them. On that very night, while Wiesenthal saw that bandaged soldier in a nightmare, three prisoners died in his cabin; next morning, totally stiff, they were thrown into the common grave. Wiesenthal was forced to go back and work in the polytechnic converted into a hospital, although he absolutely did not want to. The nurse of the day before told him that the S.S. was dead, and had left him his belongings: a bundle

¹ Cf. J. Wechsberg, *Gli assassini sono tra noi*, translated by G. Brunacci, Garzanti, Milan 1973, also quoted by [Primo Levi](#), *I sommersi e i salvati*, Einaudi, Torino 1991, p. 3.

with a note on which the address of his mother was written. Wiesenthal told the nurse to send everything to his mother, but for a strange reason he kept that address.

After the war, although travelling in Germany was still very difficult, Wiesenthal wanted to go and visit that soldier's mother in Stuttgart. He found an elderly woman who had lost her husband and her only son, who had been “such a good boy” to her. A photo of her son was hanging in the entrance: a handsome 16-year-old with big bright, light eyes. That ‘good boy’ had decided to enter the *Hitlerjugend* and later the S.S. Wiesenthal took pity on the woman and did not tell her that her son had become a murderer and had taken an active part in the extermination of the Jews in Europe.

The question of forgiveness and its limits, never stopped troubling Wiesenthal who wrote *The Sunflower*, in which he recounts the whole story and asks readers the question: what should he have done in that circumstance? What would they have done in his place? The context of the immediate post-war period must be taken into account. “After the war, priests, philanthropists and philosophers came forward to ask the world to forgive the Nazis. They were mostly fine folks, who would never have forgiven anyone for a slap received, but who did not find it difficult to ask for forgiveness in the name of the millions of murdered innocents. The priests preached that these criminals would have to stand before the Divine Judge one day, and that therefore human justice should leave them alone. Naturally this point of view was very satisfactory for the Nazis, who did not believe in God and were happy to leave it to the Divine Judge, whereas they feared earthly justice”.² In the most recent Italian edition there are 47 answers, including those of Jean Amery, Saul Friedländer, Abraham Heschel, Golo Mann, Gabriel Marcel, Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Maritain. There are also those of three Italians: Paolo De Benedetti, Primo Levi and Stefano Levi Della Torre.

Each one of us might ask: what would I have done in his place? But the point is that not one of us is in Wiesenthal’s situation; who was menaced by death daily. For example: the dying S.S. held his hand over his mother's last letter, the letter slipped to the floor, Wiesenthal picked it up and put it by the soldier's hand. The soldier thanked him, Wiesenthal was amazed: could a *Herrenmensch* thank an *Untermensch*? That had not happened for years! Then he thought: I shall never receive a letter from my mother again because she was killed at the beginning of the War. “*Pirque Avot*” states: “Don't judge someone until you have found yourself in the very same situation”.

“Christians forgive, Jews do not”: this has been one of the points of contention in the Christian anti-Judaism argument over the centuries. Every night, before going to sleep, a Jew recites the *Shema*, which is preceded by these words: “Lord of the world! I forgive all those who have made me angry, who have annoyed me, and who have trespassed against me ... let us lie down, our Father, in peace and let us rise, our King, serene in a peaceful life, extend the *sukkah*/protection of Your *shalom* over us”. Every one must forgive what has been done against him; however, he cannot forgive what has been done to others. On the holiest day of the Jewish year, the *Yom Kippur*, a day entirely dedicated to fasting and prayer, Ha-Shem/the Lord God forgives the sins committed against Him. He cannot however, not even He, forgive the sins committed against other men. Each one

² Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 83.

must go, in the days of penance that precede that great day, to the one he has offended and ask him for his forgiveness”.

Wiesenthal could, and perhaps should, have forgiven the soldier, had he asked him to forgive the sins committed against him, but how could he forgive the wrongs committed against others? If A slaps B, could C forgive him, A?

“*Die Sonnenblume/The Sunflower*” met with extraordinary international success. We may ask ourselves why this was? It concerns the question/s of guilt, responsibility, forgiveness, justice. The fault is individual and not collective, everyone is guilty for his actions, and if in Wiesenthal's time “*the murderers were among us*”, that is now no longer the case. If there are still a few survivors, they are too old for human justice to deal with them, as Wiesenthal himself declared when he retired from his quest as a “Nazi hunter”. The question of responsibility, which concerns us all, is different. To make sure that what happened does not happen again, it is not enough to be moved by listening to the tribulations of the survivors, who are now increasingly rare. To do this one must *study* in order to understand how it was possible for such a catastrophe to have happened in the heart of Europe, with its millennial Christian history. Also, to ask oneself, how it is possible that, even after the *Shoah* anti-Semitism had disappeared, it reappears in new and different forms?

Now, I should like to introduce the other character to you: Jules Isaac (Rennes 1877 — Aix-en-Provence, France, 1963). He was a well-known French historian, a secular Jew. After almost forty years of teaching history, in German-occupied France he had to abandon everything and flee. He saw his numerous books, the result of a life-time devoted to study, destroyed. He went into hiding in the French countryside with his wife, daughter, son-in-law and son (but they were discovered and deported to extermination camps: only the son would return). Isaac began to wonder how it was possible that there could be such barbarism in the heart of Europe, in the heart of the twentieth century? How could the ‘Shoah’ happen in a Europe that had been Christian for centuries? There is no doubt that Nazi anti-Semitism is different from theological anti-Judaism. However, Isaac's shocking discovery was that the teaching of contempt, spread throughout the centuries, had culminated in the myth of the deicidal people, and had helped to prepare and make possible the destruction of the Jews of Europe.

The book, *Jesus and Israel*,³ — “the cry of an indignant conscience, of a torn heart”, was finished in 1946 in the solitude of a refuge. It was published in Paris in 1948 and it covers twenty-one topics with a practical conclusion, which I shall summarize as follows:

1. The Christian religion is the daughter of the Jewish religion.
2. Jesus is a Jew.
3. His family was Jewish, his mother Maria (Miryam) was a Jew, the environment in which he lived was Hebrew.

³ Cf. J. Isaac, *Gesù e Israele*, translation by E. Castelfranchi Finzi, Marietti, Genova 2001.

4. Jesus was circumcised.
5. His name in Hebrew is Yeshua. Christ is the Greek equivalent of Messiah.
6. The New Testament was written in Greek, but Jesus spoke Aramaic [and Hebrew].
7. In the 1st century, religious life was deep and intense in Israel.
8. Jesus' teaching took place within the traditional framework of Judaism.
9. Jesus observed the Torah. He did not proclaim its abolition.
10. It is a mistake to want to separate the Gospel from Judaism.
11. The Jewish diaspora began many centuries before the birth of Jesus.
12. It cannot be said that the Jewish people as a whole denied Jesus.
13. According to the Gospels, wherever Jesus passed, with rare exceptions, he was received with enthusiasm.
14. It cannot be said that the Jewish people rejected the Messiah.
15. Jesus did not pronounce a sentence of condemnation and decadence on Israel.

The topics from 16 to 20 are dedicated to the theme of the deicidal people: “In all of Christianity, for eighteen centuries, it has been taught that the Jewish people, fully responsible for the crucifixion, carried out the inexplicable crime of deicide. There is no more deadly accusation: in fact, there is no accusation that has caused more innocent blood to flow”.

21. Israel neither rejected Jesus nor crucified him. Jesus did not reject Israel nor curse it.
22. Practical conclusion: need for a reform (*redressement*) of Christian Teaching.

In the summer of 1947 an international conference was held in Seelisberg, Switzerland, attended by about a hundred Christian delegates (of different denominations) and Jews, coming from some twenty countries. Isaac had prepared an outline of eighteen points, which were discussed, and finally a Declaration known as the *Ten Theses of Seelisberg*, Switzerland, was approved.

On that occasion the International Council of Christians and Jews was also founded. Thus, another phase began in the life of Isaac, who was among the promoters of the “Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France” (founded in 1948). He worked to establish the first Italian Jewish-Christian Friendship (which was founded in Florence in 1950). Two other books followed to complete the

work begun with “*Jesus and Israel*”: “*Genèse de l’antisémitisme*”, (Paris 1956) and “*L’enseignement du mépris*” (Paris 1965).

Isaac met two Popes: in 1949 he was received by Pius XII and in 1960 by John XXIII. During this second meeting he consigned a *Dossier* that the Pope entrusted to Cardinal Bea. It was to be the basis of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council.

Jules Isaac and Simon Wiesenthal were two great men who have been able to transform the tragedy into something that became their life mission. Wiesenthal, sought justice with all his might, Isaac made every effort to bring justice into the Judaism / Christianity relationship again, with a view to reconciliation.

We must therefore ask ourselves: according to *justice* — how should we consider the relationship between Judaism and Christianity? Pope Francis, in his address to members attending the conference organized by the “International Council of Christians and Jews” on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of the Declaration, stated that: *Nostra Aetate* “represents a definitive ‘yes’ to the Jewish roots of Christianity and an irrevocable ‘no’ to anti-Semitism [...] trust and fraternity between us have continued to grow. We are strangers no more, but friends, and brothers and sisters [...]. Both faith Traditions find their foundation in the One God, the God of the Covenant, who reveals himself through his Word. In seeking the right attitude towards God, Christians turn to Christ as the font of new life, and Jews to the teaching of the Torah” (30 June 2015).

If, as Pope Francis affirmed, “The Christian confessions find their unity in Christ; Judaism finds its unity in the *Torah*”. It remains to be asked what relationship is there between Christ and the *Torah*? Does Christ replace the *Torah*? There is a saying of Yeshua that denies this thesis: “Think not that I have come to abolish the *Torah*/Law and the *Neviim*/Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. Amen”. “For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota/a *yod*, not a dot/*taom*, will pass from the Law/Torah until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments/*miswots* and teaches others so, shall be called least in the *Malkhut ha-Shamayim*/kingdom of Heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the *Malkhut ha-Shamayim*/the kingdom of Heaven” (Mt 5:17-19). On this point there is a great deal of work to be done: the relationship with the Torah is one of the central questions that must be addressed by contemporary Christian Theology.

Francis continued: “Both faith traditions find their foundation in the One God, the God of the Covenant, who reveals himself through His word”. Ha-Shem is one, but His covenants are many, and they do not replace one another, for they are eternal, they represent the many ways in which human beings can co-operate in the work of Redemption.

There is no New Covenant opposed to an Old Covenant; there is not even a single Old-New Alliance that would force Jews to become Christians or Christians to become Jews. There is a single eternal *Torah* that contains many Covenants, the many ways in which the Holy One, blessed be He, reveals His love for men and women, and indicates the ways to arrive at an encounter with Him.

As *Nostra Aetate* shows, it is by reviewing its relationship with Judaism that the Church can open to dialogue with the other great religions. But Ha-Shem does not limit himself and does not allow himself to be limited in the religious sphere: He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the God of Israel is also the God of humanity: “We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God’s image” (*ibid.* n. 5).

The Holy One, blessed be He, in His transcendence is absolutely unknowable. We can know of Him only what He has been pleased to reveal to us: His will. The Torah is a book *to follow*: 613 *miswot* for the Jews and for those wishing to enter the Covenant of Moses, 7 *miswot* for those who wish to enter the Covenant of Noah, with the freedom to observe, if desired, besides a certain number of others/the remaining.⁴ By adhering to His will we come closer to Him. As He is holy, so we seek to sanctify ourselves, even in the minute activities of our daily life. What the Torah indicates to us, rather than orthodoxy, is an orthopraxis. The primacy of ethics is not a rejection of Revelation, but precisely the content of Revelation.

Since the Noachian covenant does not prescribe any culture, religion, myth, ritual, it is compatible with all cultures and with all the different ways of being human: in this sense it is catholic, that is universal.⁵ According to Rav Jonathan Sacks: “Unity in heaven creates diversity on earth. The same applies to civilizations. The fundamental message of the Hebrew Bible is that universality — the pact with Noah — is only the context and the prelude to the irreducible multiplicity of cultures, those systems of meaning through which human beings have tried to understand the relationship that links them, the world and the source of Being. The Platonic affirmation of the universality of truth is valid when applied to science and to the description of what is. It is not if it is applied to ethics, spirituality and our sense of what should be. There is a difference between *physis* and *nomos*, description and prescription, nature and culture. Cultures are like languages. The world they describe is the same, but the ways in which they do it are almost infinitely variable”.⁶

Jews are awaiting the Coming of the Messiah, while Christians are awaiting the return of Christ. Elia Benamozegh affirmed that the Messiah not (only) came, nor will (only) come, but is coming. Perhaps, as Hans Joachim Schoeps wrote, upon His arrival Jews and Christians may discover in his face the same features.

⁴ This is the foundation of the theme of the freedom of the Christian, but it is a question of freedom within the Law, not of freedom from the Law.

⁵ Rav Benamozegh speaks of the “catholicity of Israele” in *Israele e l’umanità*.

⁶ Cf. J. Sacks, *La dignità della differenza. Come evitare lo scontro delle civiltà*, translated by F. Paracchini, Garzanti, Milan 2004, p. 66.