

Isaac Lichtenstein - a Jesus-believing Hungarian rabbi

Kai Kjær-Hansen, International Coordinator of LCJE

Jewish believers from the past

Tonight we are going to meet Isaac (Ignatz) Lichtenstein. Joseph Rabinowitz, Yechiel Zwi Lichtenstein, Christian Theophilus Lucky and Rabbi Isaac Lichtenstein made up a remarkable quartet towards the end of the 19th century. They differed in their understanding of the faith and in their mission strategy, but on one thing they agreed: their faith in Jesus had not made them ex-Jews. They were not ashamed to be Jews who believed in Jesus. But was it possible to be believers in Jesus without being baptized publicly? Rabbi Lichtenstein and Rabinowitz gave different answers, as we are now going to see.

But first we are going to the northeastern corner of Hungary, to a small town by the name of Tisza-Eszlar. It became famous in 1882 and is connected to Rabbi Lichtenstein's faith in Jesus.

The Tisza-Eszlar Affair

With the Tisza-Eszlar Affair we have a repeat of the same old story that Jews at Pesach kill a Christian to mix the blood into their unleavened bread. On April 1, 1882, a young servant girl by the name of Esther Solymossi is sent shopping. She never comes back. It is soon rumoured that she has been killed by the Jews. Eight-year-old Moritz, son of a Jewish butcher, is threatened to say that he had seen his father and others take Esther to the synagogue, cut her throat and pour her blood into a basin.

And then an anti-Semitic hell broke loose. Esther was later found, she had drowned in the river and there were no signs that her throat had been cut. Of course the groundless charges did not stick, and at a trial in Budapest in 1883 the Jews were acquitted. But the whole situation had, before then, received much attention in the European press. Professor Franz Delitzsch, Leipzig, also got involved through articles and a pamphlet, which pointed out the unreasonable accusation against Jews for using Christian blood at Pesach.

In Tapio Szele, then a two-and-a-half-hour train journey east from Budapest, Isaac Lichtenstein was District Rabbi. He was born in 1825 and had been a rabbi since circa 1845. He naturally kept himself informed about the Tisza-Eszlar Affair. And at that time Delitzsch's writings came into Rabbi Lichtenstein's hands. In these there were severe attacks on the anti-Semitism that had been expressed by some Christian theologians. Lichtenstein was now challenged to find out if the New Testament is an anti-Semitic book. He even had the "forbidden" book in his library. Although unread, for approximately 30 years earlier a schoolteacher in Tapio Szele had shown Rabbi Lichtenstein a Bible that included the New Testament. Lichtenstein immediately confiscated the dangerous book and placed it in his own library.

But in connection with the Tisza-Eszlar Affair Rabbi Lichtenstein read in the forbidden and dangerous book. And yes, in 1883 he came to faith in Jesus Messiah. He did not at once proclaim his new-found faith from the rooftops. But gradually his sermons became more and more influenced by New Testament ideas, although the name of Jesus was not mentioned. It is in 1885 (presumably) that he preaches on the whitewashed tombs; he says that the text is taken from the New Testament and confesses that he believes in Jesus as Israel's true Messiah.

And then, not unexpectedly, opposition against him from the Jewish leadership flared up. That was in 1886, but the extraordinary thing is that Lichtenstein even until 1892 continued to work as a rabbi in Tapio Szele. He must have had some very loyal supporters in his congregation.

I will confine myself to a few glimpses from the first time after he has made it public that he is a Jesus-believer.

Did not Jesus belong to the Jews?

Andrew Moody was at that time in Budapest as a missionary for the Free Church of Scotland. In his yearly reports Moody gives much interesting information about Lichtenstein, information that fills out some gaps that other sources have left.

In his yearly report for 1886 (published May 1887) Moody says that Lichtenstein came to him in Budapest “about two years and a half ago”. So the meeting must have taken place in the period from the summer of 1884 to the turn of the year 1885. Lichtenstein came “in secret, and although he said that he was a Rabbi in office, he hesitated about giving his name, and saying where the little town or village was from which he came.”

But the connection between Lichtenstein and Moody has been made and it is cemented in the following time. “From the first,” Moody writes, “he said that it was his desire, in confessing Christ, to carry his little flock with him; he had been long with them, enjoyed their respect and confidence, and hoped to be able to hold his ground. He was determined, if possible, not to separate himself from the Jews. Did not Christ belong to the Jews? was his contention.”

As we shall soon see, there are more sides than one to such an issue.

Three pamphlets in 1886

In the summer of 1886 Lichtenstein tells Moody in one of their conversations that he has committed his thoughts to writing. Moody urged him to give them publicity through the press. “We had much conversation on the subject; the resolution cost him a struggle; for it was evident that, to publish what he had written with his name appended, would be to cross the *Rubicon*,” Moody writes. Lichtenstein insists that first must a pamphlet “in defence of the Talmud” be published. “His object was to introduce himself to the public in his real character as a true Jew, who held in high honour the commentaries and traditions of the fathers.”

Which is what he did. In August 1886 the first pamphlet is published, in German, the English title is given as *The Talmud on its Trial*. It does not attract any attention to speak of. Jesus and the New Testament are quoted, but it is no manifesto for the Christian faith. In one of the newspapers a Jewish writer described it as in the main “harmless”. In December 1886 appears a pamphlet with the title *Love and Conversion*, which I am not going to deal with here. In between, in the autumn of 1886, had come pamphlet no. 2 with the German title *Mein Zeugnis (My Testimony)*. It caused an uproar in the Jewish world in Austria-Hungary.

Moody says that “its appearance was like the bursting of a bomb-shell”. In Moody’s English translation the pamphlet opens with these words: “My testimony for Christ is so simple and self-evident that I feel, if I were to keep silence, that the very stones would cry out.” And Lichtenstein continues: “Christ is the pillar of truth, the most glorious treasure of heaven, the brightest ornament of creation, the most exalted Son of Man who ever worked on earth, incarnate righteousness, the world’s Saviour, the world’s Messiah.” And further on: “The Mosaic religion, with its sacrifices and ceremonial observances, was for the Jews, but the Jewish faith – the worship of God, trust in God, love of one’s neighbour, self-denial, sanctification, the sanctity of marriage, chastity and moral purity, the faith, the religion of the world – was founded and established by Christ. ‘The law was given by Moses, grace and truth came by Christ’.”

Reactions to the three pamphlets

Franz Delitzsch reads these pamphlets with great joy and immediately sends his congratulations in a letter to Lichtenstein. The reaction was, naturally, different in the Jewish world. In *Oesterreichische Wochenschrift* the editor, Dr. Bloch, writes an article entitled *The Christian Rabbi* and says, among other things: “That a Rabbi in office should maintain that Christ was the Messiah was a thing unheard of, and was not to be endured. Out with him! Away with him! If he has his convictions let him keep them; but he cannot remain with us.”

Lichtenstein is invited to a meeting in Budapest with the chief Rabbis of the city. First they query that Lichtenstein is the author of the pamphlets; next they try to persuade him to stop the circulation of them. Then he challenges them to prove that he is wrong. Moody then continues: “When they saw that their threats were useless, they concluded by saying that if he adhered to these opinions he must leave them and be baptized immediately (!) When he came to me next day he was much excited, and said, ‘If the Jewish ministers of religion now tell me that I must be baptized, it is a sure sign that this ought not to be at present’.”

I cannot here deal with the many “wicked efforts” that were made to stir up the people against him. Moody says in this connection: “The people, however, showed no disposition to part with him, and we were told that on one occasion, at a meeting, a member rose to say, ‘We are attached to our Rabbi and wish no other, and if he tells us that we ought to be baptized we shall follow him’.”

How Lichtenstein reacted to opposition to him emerges from the following example from the autumn of 1888. In 1888-1889 Lichtenstein and some of his family are involved in a business, which resulted in a heavy

financial loss, and he is forced to sell his house. However, he is able to buy another in Tapio Szele from money he receives from friends in London.

Moody believes that Lichtenstein was treated unjustly by the Jews, and in the beginning of 1889 he has this comment: "A few weeks ago I asked him to furnish me with a succinct account of the course of events, bringing out how the Jews had dealt with him." In a letter of February 8, 1889, Lichtenstein sends his reply from Tapio Szele: "Rev. Sir, in order to comply with your request I should have to begin with accusations, and end with pronouncing judgment, while my Master has taught me to bear every evil in humility, to cast the mantle of love over human weaknesses, and with the Son to say, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'."

In 1892 he realizes that for the sake of peace he will have to step down from his task as rabbi in Tapio Szele. Which he did. But as far as I can see, this does not mean that he emerges as an evangelist in Budapest or forms a congregation.

Again Moody has an interesting note. In his report for 1893 he mentions that the Free Church has begun to have a Hebrew meeting on Sundays. A board is hung up on the door with the words, "Beit Ha Midrash" and there are texts in Hebrew that invite people to attend. They focus on the Psalms, occasionally also on passages from the Prophets. And then Moody writes: "Rabbi Lichtenstein is usually with us. He reads his verse with the others, and offers his remarks, which are often striking and interesting. He has not lectured in this city [Budapest] as he has done in Hamburg and London, but he is ready to take part in this meeting as it is not advertised."

"... as it is not advertised". I wonder what that means and what conclusions can be drawn about Rabbi Lichtenstein's work for the salvation of Jews in Budapest. At that time approximately 10 years have passed since he came to faith.

Lichtenstein and baptism

Lichtenstein did not accept the challenge from some in the congregation in Tapio Szele who said that they would follow him even if he were baptized. For he himself did not want to be baptized although there was no shortage of requests that he do it. A few examples:

In his report for 1886 Moody writes about Lichtenstein: "I have spoken with him repeatedly about baptism, and endeavoured to show him that if he confessed Christ fully he must be baptized, but he has till now maintained that if he were to be baptized, he would break the connection with his people, and that his influence would be gone. He is exposed to many dangers, however, and one cannot but desire that he would take the decisive step now." Moody reminded him several times but without success. So did others, including Joseph Rabinowitz, on a visit to Budapest. But also in vain.

In a letter to Moody in February 1889 Rabinowitz writes: "Greet Rabbi Lichtenstein, and tell him 'the hour is come ... a corn of wheat if it *die*, it bringeth forth *much fruit*.' We are *buried* with Him by baptism *into death*, that like as the Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk *in newness of life* (John xii, 23,24, Rom. vi. 4). If Rabbi Lichtenstein verily loves his people Israel, and wishes to bring him fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God, let him be baptized." Rabinowitz concludes his letter with the following words: "In general, the Jews are not standing in need of *theology learning* by their Rabbis, but of *good examples*." According to Rabinowitz Lichtenstein has not taken the crucial step away from Judaism or realized that one cannot put a patch onto an old garment.

In the autumn of 1891 Rabinowitz was in Budapest with his wife and his daughter. On that occasion Rabinowitz' wife was baptized by Moody. On October 5, Rabinowitz telegraphed home, "*Mama, gerettet*" (mother saved). Lichtenstein and Rabinowitz met twice in Moody's house.

They did not see eye to eye on the necessity of Jesus-believers being baptized publicly. According to some sources, however, Lichtenstein later baptized himself in a Sabbath *mikve*, immersing himself in the name of Jesus.

I do not have a clear impression why Lichtenstein did not take that step. As he had been ostracized from the synagogue, baptism would not have made any difference in relation to that. And yet. The fact that he had not been baptized publicly presumably made it possible for him to be buried in a Jewish graveyard in 1908.

But during his life Dr Bloch's words from 1886 remained in force: "Out with him! Away with him! If he has his convictions let him keep them; but he cannot remain with us." I, for one, cannot criticize Dr Bloch. It is Jewish people's right to define what the synagogue will accept as regards a Rabbi in office – a rabbi who believes in Jesus.

Or what do you think?

Kai Kjær-Hansen lcje-kai@post4.tele.dk

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Texts on the internet

See Jorge Quiñónez' Messianic Archive Page at <http://www.afii.org/jorge.htm>