



## A TEMPLE IN THE HEART OF THE CITY ISRAEL J. YUVAL

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I came to Wiko after ten years of academic-administrative work, during which I established a new research center at the Hebrew University called “Scholion”. My ability to conduct research during those years was limited. Coming to Wiko was therefore a much-needed incentive. I hoped that it would quickly refuel my creativity and writing. I won’t forget my first day in Berlin. I landed in Schönefeld in the morning and by noon I was already working at my desk. The reception was perfect. I had never received such hospitality before. The unique beginning was an omen of the future and indicative of my entire stay at Wiko. Fellows tend to compare Wiko to paradise, but this comparison is insulting. Wiko is a much more enticing garden. Whereas in the mythological garden of Eden God banishes anyone who eats the fruit from the tree of knowledge, in Wiko you are urged to eat more and more of it. Moreover, in the biblical Eden there is only one God who envies one man: “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3, 5). In the Wiko garden there are 40 men and women who are treated like gods.

After settling in so quickly, I was able to begin some very productive research. I came to Wiko with the intention of working on an 8th-century text, a *Midrash* (exegesis) called

*Pesikta Rabbati*. For the past twenty years I have been trying to find echoes of a Christian presence within Jewish rabbinical literature, either in a polemical form or by appropriating some of its premises and turning them into Jewish concepts. Underlying these attempts is the hypothesis that during the first millennium AD Judaism was slowly marginalized, while Christianity became dominant. At a certain historical moment rabbinical Judaism suddenly found itself absorbing and not simply bequeathing. My historical assumption is that this process could not have taken place without the development of Jewish defence mechanisms and attempts to delegitimize the competing religion.

The sources defy these assumptions. Rabbinic literature scarcely makes mention of Christianity. This silence is provocative and has brought me to seek an alternative ear. I began to listen to the way they conducted their polemics in a concealed manner. I began by examining a text – *Pesikta* – that was to be a kind of exploratory drill, looking for some signs of oil. But how can one prove the presence of a polemic when its creators are trying to hide it?

The work of a scholar is unpredictable and it is hard to guess when the drill will produce oil and whether it will be crude or refined. The text I chose immediately struck oil. As I delved into it, together with Clemens Leonhard and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, I realized that research on this text has to this day completely missed its most important context – the dialogue with Christianity. *Pesikta* was probably edited in the Land of Israel (though some scholars think it was edited in Italy) in a Byzantine environment and during the Arab conquests. These upheavals emerge in the text as the editors desired to establish a Jewish identity and see it survive in a competing religious environment that appropriates the canonical text – the Bible. This was done by absorbing Christian ideas into the Jewish sphere, but sometimes the process created disagreement and polemics. *Pesikta Rabbati* appears as the Midrashic text most influenced by Christianity, but also one that is constantly debating with the latter's principles.

As I mentioned before, two partners joined me in this project – Daniel and Clemens. The three of us are studying liturgy and are searching for the footprints of the respective other religion in the Jewish and Christian liturgies. The days dedicated to our joint readings were the most beautiful of my stay at Wiko.

I was privileged to be part of an institute whose human, cultural and spiritual values were very much like those of the institute I established in Jerusalem. The Talmud states that one of the 49 qualities needed for the study of the Torah is a “community of friends”. The greatest achievements in experimental and theoretical sciences, as in art and literature,

were perhaps made by exceptional individuals, but the “community of friends” that Wiko so carefully nurtures is not at the expense of individuality. The joint lunches were the most difficult ritual for me to become accustomed to. I am not used to eating in the middle of the day, and the obligation to stop working and make time for small talk seemed to me a waste of time. But now, one of the new innovations I wish to implement in Scholion will be: joint lunches.

Another wondrous socialization mechanism in Wiko was music. The concerts that took place in Wiko and the joint excursions of the Fellows to concerts downtown made music a valuable cohesive agent. Indeed, 19th-century literature and classical music were the two most common subjects of discussion among the Fellows. The conversations on the former subject made me realize how ignorant I am. The conversations on the latter made me realize how much more I have to study. These subjects are indicative of the cultural horizons in which the discourse in Wiko takes place. Yet, they are extremely Western. The majority of scholars came from Europe and North America. Africa, South America, Central and East Asia were hardly represented. Some of the Fellows from the Middle East have lived and taught for years in the West. I think it is appropriate to offer a wider range of cultural representation.

History is forever present in Wiko. The corner of Erdener Straße, from which Jews were sent *en masse* to the Grunewald station, and the monument commemorating the murder of the German-Jewish foreign minister Walter Rathenau were daily reminders not just of the almost complete disappearance of Jews from Berlin but also to the disappearance of the Jewish-German culture that flourished in Berlin until a few decades ago. My grandparents, both from Vienna, were executed by Austrian soldiers who served in the *Wehrmacht* as retaliation for the killing of 22 German soldiers by the Serbian underground. Being their grandson, returning to Berlin, speaking German, enjoying German music and making German friends is a great comfort, but also the source of immense sadness for what could have been in this city if hatred had not taken root in people’s hearts.

I was fortunate to come to a city that today cherishes culture and is tolerant of people as they are. Wiko is the temple in the heart of this city.