

## Yachad BeYeshua Online Conference Presentation

December 14, 2021

### **Our Mission: Loving Fellowship & Faithful Witness** **By Dr. Mark Kinzer**

How does loving fellowship among Jewish disciples of Yeshua bear witness to God's faithfulness to Israel and the Church?

Jewish mystical tradition points us in the direction of an answer. It teaches that there are 600,000 letters in the Torah, each corresponding to one of the 600,000 root souls of the people of Israel. This leads to an interpretation of the name "Israel" as an acronym for the saying, "*Yesh Shishim Ribo Otivot LaTorah*"—"there are six hundred thousand letters in the Torah." As the Jewish philosopher Immanuel Levinas puts it, "It is as if the multiplicity of persons [within the people of Israel] . . . were the condition for the plenitude of 'absolute truth,' as if every person, through his [or her] uniqueness, were the guarantee of the revelation of a unique aspect of truth."

This means that all Jews, with our widely divergent backgrounds and opinions, need one another. Only together do we grasp and express the truth of God. I would propose here that this is also the case for Jewish disciples of Yeshua, who are meant to be a kind of microcosm of the Jewish people as a whole—just as the Jewish people themselves are a kind of microcosm of humanity. Our mission is to confess the faithfulness of God to Israel and the Church as enacted in the crucified and resurrected Messiah. We can only fulfill that mission together, in loving fellowship with one another.

### **My Journey: Yeshua as God's Faithfulness to Israel & the Church**

What in my own journey has led me to this conclusion?

My first encounter with Yeshua had no obvious connection to Israel *or* the Church. It had everything to do with *God*, who had laid hold of me through this exotic figure from ancient history. I had been on a philosophical quest for truth; instead, *Truth* found *me*.

I was a Jew, but Jewish religion had no attraction for me. That changed when my first mentor in Yeshua, Haskell Stone of blessed memory, sent me back to my families' synagogue. The shul in which I had become bar mitzvah turned out to be quite a different place when one entered it with faith in the Living God. To my great surprise, I discovered there that God was not only the living Truth for me personally, but also the covenant partner who kept faith with Israel, even when Israel did not keep faith with Him.

But the Church remained an alien mystery to me. That changed several months after my return to synagogue. Beginning my second year at the University of Michigan, I attended the prayer meetings of an ecumenical charismatic community founded by Roman Catholics. I was enthralled by what I experienced there. The worship of the community offered a taste of the world to come, and their life together bore witness to Yeshua's power to reconcile those formerly estranged. Here were Jew and gentile, white and black, Latino and Asian-American, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox, sharing an intense communal life. This was the good news of Jesus, visible and touchable in the form of a diverse group of people living in loving fellowship!

At first, I could not understand how these fervent followers of Jesus could be so loyal to their (in my view) lifeless denominations. But through these Christian friends I gradually came to a new conviction: that I could not embrace the New Testament's witness to Yeshua while showing contempt for those throughout history who had transmitted that book from generation to generation. Somehow God had kept faith with the Church, even when the Church had not kept faith with Him.

### **My Journey: Messianic Judaism & God's Two-fold Faithfulness**

All of this took place in 1971, when the Messianic Jewish movement was in its infancy. For the next six years I found my own way as a Jewish follower of Jesus, attending Shabbat services at the local Conservative synagogue, where I sensed God's continued presence among His people; and becoming a leader of the ecumenical community that had taught me about loving fellowship and God's faithfulness to the Church.

My first experience of the Messianic Jewish movement occurred in 1977 at the Kansas City Conference on the Holy Spirit. Our community was helping to organize the event, which brought together tens of thousands of charismatics from all over the world and from multiple denominations. I served as the administrative assistant for the Messianic Jewish segment of the conference. Overseeing this segment was David Stern, future translator of the New Testament. I served as David's right hand. (And thus began a friendship that continues to this day.)

For me, the 1977 Kansas City conference was a double revelation. On the one hand, I heard an urgent prophetic call to work for the healing of Yeshua's broken body, and saw the essential role which Yeshua's Jewish followers were called to play in that healing process. This conference brought together Catholics, Orthodox, mainline Protestants, and evangelicals, who disagreed about almost everything; but all were eager to listen to Messianic Jews! Judaism offered a possible key to unlock the gates of ecumenical engagement.

On the other hand, I was shocked at the level of discord that existed among the Messianic Jewish leaders themselves. At one session it seemed as though a fist-fight was about to break out between two of the most well-known presenters, with David Stern acting as a reluctant referee. How could Jewish disciples of Yeshua be a balm for the wounds of the people of God when we were inflicting wounds on one another?

### **The Conflicted Modern History of Jewish Christianity & Messianic Judaism**

As I studied the modern history of Jewish believers in Jesus, I discovered that my experience in Kansas City was no anomaly. The Hebrew Christians of the nineteenth century were all upstanding members of their diverse churches, who identified ethnically as Israelites but religiously as Christians. They welcomed all Protestant Jews to their fellowship—but, of course, Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Jews need not apply.

At the turn of the twentieth century a new impulse became visible among them, leading some Hebrew Christians to seek a stronger connection to the Jewish community and more traditionally Jewish forms of religious practice. The leadership of the Hebrew Christian movement rejected this new impulse, and labeled it heresy. But it survived as a dissenting underground current, as seen in the life of my beloved mentor, Haskell Stone. In the late 1960s the embers of this revival of Jewish identity were stirred into flame. What became known as Messianic Judaism soon overwhelmed and marginalized the old Hebrew Christian establishment. The tables were turned, and Messianic Jews now treated Hebrew Christians as the outsiders.

Unsurprisingly, Messianic Judaism itself soon became fractured. Missionaries tangled with those focused on building congregations. Charismatics disputed with non-charismatics. Leaders of the congregational movement divided over matters of governmental structure. Those seeking a closer relationship to the wider Jewish community fought with those more closely tied to the evangelical world. In the midst of such internal disarray, it was difficult to hear a divine call to serve the unity of the whole people of God, Jewish and Christian.

### **The Paradigmatic Early History of Jewish Disciples of Yeshua: The Good News Embodied**

In its first proclamation, the good news of Yeshua took communal form in a body of Jews that was a microcosm of all Israel, and thus also of all the nations. Luke tells us in the book of Acts that devout Jews “from every nation under heaven” were gathered in Jerusalem for the holiday of Shavuot (Pentecost). They were astonished to hear the 120 Judean and Galilean disciples of Yeshua proclaiming the “mighty deeds of God” in the languages of the diaspora. Through the Messiah and the gift of the Spirit, God was overcoming the discord among nations that originated at the Tower of Babel. But those who heard the message on Pentecost were not

actually members of those nations! On the contrary, they were all *Jews*—that is, Jews who resided among the nations and now spoke the languages of their hosts!

Jews of the land of Israel proclaimed the messianic revelation, and Jews from the diaspora received it. This diverse group of Jews become the first Spirit-empowered community of the resurrected Messiah. In their life together of fellowship (*koinonia*), summarized so memorably in Acts 2:42, they embodied the message they had received. From them revelation went forth to all the nations of the earth.

The same dynamic played out in the formation of the New Testament canon. All of these texts were composed by Jewish insiders. Moreover, these insiders reflected the wide range of Jewish perspectives known from their era, and viewed the revelation of Yeshua through the lens of those diverse streams of Jewish life. Thus, the author of the gospel of Mark brings to his material a sensibility resembling what is found in the Enochic tradition of Second Temple Judaism. Luke writes like a Torah-faithful Hellenistic Jew, while John's thinking resembles the stark binaries of light and darkness, truth and falsehood, seen in the writings of the Dead Sea community. And don't let Matthew's polemics against the Scribes and Pharisees fool you – he is the most scribal and Pharisaic of the gospel writers, employing many concepts and terms found later in rabbinic literature. As for Paul, he seems to bring all these pieces together, as a Hellenistic Pharisee who became an apocalyptic visionary. Just as the Torah of 600,000 letters requires the interpretive engagement of 600,000 Israelites; and just as the initial proclamation of the good news required a community of Jews from all the nations; so now the textual vessel fashioned for that good news required the voices of every major stream of Jewish life of that era in order to convey the infinite richness of divine revelation.

It seems as though the entire community of Israel, present through divinely appointed representatives, was intimately bound up with the Good News. The messianic fellowship of Pentecost comprised Jews from many different backgrounds, and they often found it difficult to get along with one another. Tensions arose first between the Hebrews and Hellenists, but after that it seems as though Paul was always a party to the disputes--Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Peter, Paul and James, Paul and the Pharisaic members of the community. Despite it all, they somehow managed to keep it together, and to lay the groundwork for a movement that has endured for two millennia.

Tragically, after two Jewish wars with Rome, Jewish disciples of Yeshua became marginalized members of the community that their ancestors had founded. With hostility between leaders of the Church and of the Jewish people intensifying, the "*ecclesia* of the circumcision" disappeared as a visible corporate presence in the body of the Messiah. Now that body lacked any visible expression of Jewish life, much less one that was itself a microcosm of the Jewish people.

## **Modern & Ancient Miracles**

Against this historical backdrop, the nineteenth century emergence of Hebrew Christianity, and the twentieth century appearance of Messianic Judaism, Jewish Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodox Jewish identity, was something of a miracle. Despite their contentious relationships with one another, groups of Jewish disciples of Jesus were once again a visible presence among the people of Israel and within the Church.

And in our own twenty-first century a new miracle is taking place. While the world around us has become more polarized and fragmented, formerly estranged Jewish disciples of Yeshua are becoming friends. This miracle preceded the birth of Yachad BeYeshua, and our new fellowship is but one expression of its power.

In light of this twenty-first century process of relational healing among Jewish disciples of Yeshua, the vocations of James, Paul, and Peter take on new meaning. All three were Jewish disciples of Yeshua, and all three remained loyal to the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition. For them all, the death and resurrection of Jesus represented God's faithful confirmation of the covenant promises to Israel, for Israel's benefit and for the blessing of the nations. But each was called to a different way of bearing witness to God's faithfulness.

James was called to be deeply rooted in the center of Jewish life in Jerusalem. As a devout Jew, he won the respect of the wider Jewish community, while bearing witness to the resurrected Messiah. Paul was called to live among non-Jews, carrying the message of Yeshua to the nations of the world. And Peter shouldered the difficult task of bridging the gap between Paul and James, holding together this incredibly dynamic, diverse, and at times discordant movement. The future of the faith they shared depended on their commitment to one another. Miraculously, amidst all the disagreements and tensions, they managed to stick together.

Jewish disciples of Yeshua face the same challenge in our own days. This call goes out to all Jewish disciples of Yeshua. Not all are called to Yachad BeYeshua, but all are summoned to honor the mission that Hashem has given us: to unite Jewish disciples of Yeshua in loving fellowship, as a witness to God's faithfulness to Israel and the Church. The loving fellowship with one another which Yachad BeYeshua seeks to embody is not our task alone. But if we embrace it and are faithful to it, we will open doors of relational healing for other Jewish disciples of Yeshua, and for the two-fold people of God as a whole. In our faithfulness to God and to one another, to Israel and to the Church, we have a share in God's own faithfulness.

Israel is a microcosm of the nations, and we Jewish disciples of Yeshua are a microcosm of Israel. As such, we are all letters of the Torah, and only together do we spell out the name of Yeshua, the living Torah, the one who is God's definitive Yes to Israel, the Church, and all

creation. Let us find our individual places in the scroll, and be inscribed together as a word of reconciliation and hope for the entire world.