

**BOROUGH PARK SYMPOSIUM**

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JEWISH AND ARAB**

**BELIEVERS IN ISRAEL:**

**THE CURRENT SITUATION AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

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In my response to the paper by Doctors Soref and Postell on the relationships between Jewish and Arab Believers in Israel, I would first like to compliment the authors on their clear presentation of the subject. They have based their opinions and perceptions on their analysis of research data, produced by the respective leadership communities. The research carried out by Azar Ajaj among Israeli Arab Evangelicals in 2013, was both revealing and personally challenging. Although the research, carried out by the authors among Israeli Messianic leaders in late 2014, is in my opinion based on an inadequate representation of the community, it too is revealing and challenging.

Both studies clearly show disturbing trends, for at least some of the reasons behind the existing strained relationship between the two communities. However, I believe there are some factors that are conspicuously absent from the research and analysis. I will address these factors in my response.

I enjoyed the approach of the "Discussion" section of the Soref/ Postell paper. They wisely included a third party in their discussion from the outset – the International Evangelical Community, not just as a spectator to the internal conflict between Arab and Jewish Believers in the Land, but as a highly influential player. This external influence on the two Middle Eastern sons of Abraham has enormous potential both for good and bad. Allow me to elaborate...

The International Evangelical Community has, at its disposal, a cornucopia of resources, including educational institutions, manpower, finances and a wealth of field experience. All of these can make an enormous contribution to the development of the local communities of Jesus-followers in Israel, if used wisely and selflessly. Sadly, in my 30+ years as a senior leader in the Messianic community, the wise and selfless use of said resources has been the exception rather than the rule. All-too-often, the International Evangelical Community has used these resources to foster unhealthy loyalties with one of the local communities, at the expense of the other.

These loyalties, often driven by politically-based theological agendas, are then 'held in place' by the promise of financial support. This is a deadly combination, given our spiritual and sociological context. Both local communities desperately need international resource partners who are motivated by Christ-like love. This love needs to be selfless and wise in its balanced perception of a national community consisting of Jews, Arabs and other people groups affiliated with us. I believe that when Soref and Postell use the terms "diminished love" or "antipathy" in the beginning of their discussion, they refer to ungodly motivations amongst internationals, which drive unhealthy loyalties rampant in our communities; these 'loyalties' hold us hostage. I offer a challenge to the

International Evangelical Community at large; to consider whether they desire to be part of the solution to the conflict between our two local communities, or part of the problem.

Moving the focus to the local communities in Israel, and the onus upon us to shoulder our responsibilities, is essential. Soref and Postell perceive the tension between the two groups as “largely stemming from the burden each community has for their own people, along with language and cultural barriers” (page 13). While these are definitely contributing factors, it is essential that we identify at least one other major sociological/ spiritual problem. Here, I am referring to a serious ‘blind-spot’ in our collective consciousness, in the form of an endemic sense of self-entitlement – an ‘everybody-owes-me mentality’. I believe this stems from a deeply-rooted victim mentality, which exists collectively in both our Jewish and Arab communities.

This widespread impediment to healthy spiritual growth and freedom of fellowship between our communities, results from weaknesses in our respective theologies. The Israeli Messianic Community places much emphasis on an eschatology that perceives the return of the Jews and the establishment of the modern State of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecies, such as seen in Jeremiah 31:31-37 and Ezekiel 36:24-28 (among others). Whether our parents or we ourselves were immigrants, we cannot separate these Scriptures from our own personal testimonies, and as such, our very identity in Messiah. In trying to defend this theological position, we tend to aggressively repudiate any theology that challenges it. Even a criticism of the political policies of the State, is readily seen as a challenge to Messianic theology, or worse, as being anti-Semitic.

The Evangelical Arab Community, on the other hand, has traditionally placed little emphasis on eschatology; rather, it has based its identity on a Christology that stems from its ancient historical presence in the Land. This is coupled with generations of long-suffering under the yoke of a series of hostile entities, including several decades of Jewish sovereignty, whilst living under the societal shadow of an overwhelming Moslem majority.

In recent years, a significant number of Arab Evangelicals have hotly pursued theological education and are challenging Messianic eschatology and Christian Zionism. This, of course, has led to confrontation between the respective leadership communities and academics have spent an inordinate amount of time and energy “delegitimizing the other side” (page 14). Soref and Postell see this as an “attempt to capture the allegiance of the (international) Evangelical community” (page 14). While this may be true, there is no doubt that these pursuits are at the cost of the effective evangelization of our respective peoples. I agree wholeheartedly with their statement, “Jewish and Arab followers of Jesus

need one another (now more than ever) to accomplish the missiological task of proclaiming the gospel of God's supernatural love in Israel and throughout the Middle East" (page 15).

It is essential that both communities strengthen their biblical understanding of the theology of the Kingdom of God, and become more intentional in pursuing lifestyles aligned with this worldview and its ethical values. In doing so, we could find ourselves with far more in common than we previously thought. We might even discover that we do have a message of hope and comfort to offer our suffering societies. The Apostle's words in his letter to the Romans cry out to us in challenge:

*"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*" Romans 10: 14, 15

While we all agree that a proactive unity between our conflicted communities is essential, and identifying certain obstacles to this is helpful, it is even more important that we offer practical solutions. I will begin with what I consider the most sensitive, the issue of international financial support. Both our Messianic and Arab Evangelical sectors of the local Body of Messiah are dependent on external financial support for the maintenance and development of congregations and institutions. We are extremely grateful to the International Christian Community's investment in us, and it is hard to imagine how we would have managed without that support. However, as we detailed earlier, this support comes with a price, which all-too-often impacts the moral integrity of the local Body in Israel.

To mitigate these problems, stringent methods of accountability need to be in place. International resource partners should be encouraged to connect with local 'recommendation boards', consisting of leaders from both the Arab Evangelical and Messianic communities. These leaders must have credibility, experience, and seniority. Several of these teams currently exist, and are effective in allocating significant financial assistance where it is needed most. Not only does this reduce the need for local ministers and directors of organizations to be away from their local responsibilities for inordinate periods of time, it also provides an infrastructure of accountability that is sorely needed. In addition, these local recommendation boards (three of which I serve on) provide valuable opportunities for mature brothers and sisters from our respective communities to work together, advocating for the benefit of each another's communities. At the heart of these boards are core values and 'Kingdom ethics,' reflecting the strongly expressed appeal in my colleagues' paper.

I also believe that we must demonstrate our unity in all aspects of field ministry. Our para-congregational ministries should be encouraged to express core biblical values inclusive of the 'other'. Examples include children's summer camps, national youth ministries, women's ministries, discipleship programs, prayer movements, short-term mission initiatives abroad, and indeed the educational programs of our respective educational institutions. While progress has been made on all fronts by ministries such as "Lech L'cha", "Netivah", "SAYF" and "Musalaha", more work must be done. Experience builds trust and confidence; when we see results in the form of transformed lives then the voices of the detractors and opponents to unity, lose their power and influence.

As high-profile academic leaders in our respective communities, our national theological institutions must take a primary role in demonstrating pro-active unity. This can take the form of inclusive training programs, sharing of academic resources, and encouragement of forums where divergent theologies can be debated in a mutually edifying manner. I personally have been greatly encouraged this past semester, by taking part in a MA program for ministers at "Israel College of the Bible". From a cohort of 24 ministers, 13 are Arab Evangelicals and 11 are from the Messianic Community. Our lectures are conducted in Hebrew, Arabic, and English on topics directly affecting our ministries. Studying together enables us to form bonds of understanding and builds confidence and desire to pursue fruitful relationships; these stand as testimony of Jesus' love to our broader societies.

The conclusions that Soref and Postell draw are strong. There is no doubt that we must accept the challenge to celebrate our differences in ways that honor the Lord Jesus AND each other. As leaders, we must be fully aware that our congregations, especially the younger generation, are watching us, looking for a healthy spiritual model to follow. The eyes of our respective societies are also upon us. The effects of our intractable national conflict are visible, and our communities are polarized as never before. Let us rise to the challenge; let us demonstrate a message of hope that celebrates the richness of our cultural diversity. Let us embrace our commonality, which is based in our hope and faith in the One who saved us.