

Borough Park Symposium IV
Messianic Jewish Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
What should Messianic Jewish leaders be discussing within our own community about
the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?
Russ Resnik

Hillel used to say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?¹

In the midst of my work on this paper, I heard the news, along with the rest of the world, of the abduction, and then the murder, of Eyal Yifrach, Gil-ad Shaar and Naftali Fraenkel. Responding to the question “What should Messianic Jewish leaders be discussing within our own community about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?” became even more complex and challenging. Whatever we say about the conflict must ring true even in the aftermath of such an outrage.²

Because we are Messianic Jewish leaders, who serve in the light of Messiah’s resurrection, our message must include hope. Indeed it must be centered on hope. Somehow we have to find a way to speak of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in fidelity to the clear promises of Scripture, in recognition of the unique Jewish journey through history, and also in hope, not only for redemption in the age to come, but also for just resolution in this age. The murders of Eyal, Gil-ad, and Naftali, however, made just resolution seem even more impossible than before.

A few days later we heard of the abduction and revenge killing in Jerusalem of another youth, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, and again the horizon of hope seemed to recede. But the next day I read a quote that brought that horizon back into view. Yishai Fraenkel, Naftali’s uncle, condemned the latest killing. “There is no difference between blood and blood. A murderer is a murderer, no matter his nationality and age.”³ While we maintain our national grieving over the murder of our own, we also grieve the murder of our neighbor. One loss might be closer to us, but the other is just as reprehensible.

Hillel’s words guide our Messianic Jewish discourse about the conflict: “If I am not for myself—if I as a Jew am not ready to stand in solidarity with Israel—who will be for me? If I am only for myself—if my stance for Israel somehow blinds me to the sufferings of others—what am I?”

¹ Pirke Avot 1:14, in *The Koren Siddur*. With introduction, translation and commentary by Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks. (Jerusalem: Koren Publications, 2009), 644.

² Since those lines were written, the conflict and our response to it have become even more difficult, with the Gaza war, the horrendous rise of anti-Semitic activity that followed it, and the escalating outbreak of ISIS and other Islamic terror groups.

³ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israeli-military-clash-with-palestinians-after-body-of-arab-teenager-found/2014/07/02/f842a578-a09d-4760-bc33-6a1ba6da228a_story.html, accessed 7/05/14.

If this sounds like a balancing act, that's exactly what I intend. As Messianic Jewish leaders, we lose our unique potential for influence and impact if we simply align with one pre-established position or another. Instead, our words about the conflict must rise above, and reflect a perspective beyond, the polarizing discourse that increasingly characterizes the public square in the digital age. The alacrity with which Jesus-professing people align themselves with one political agenda or another—not only regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but all of today's high-profile political questions—is scandalous. Instead of merely choosing sides, however, we can articulate a response to the conflict rooted in the fullness of Scripture, which includes the messianic vision of peace as well as the unbreakable grant of the land of Israel to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The title of our symposium itself is part of the balancing act. I will argue in this paper that we are to approach the conflict from the prophetic-ethical perspective that informs Hillel's saying above. If we insist on the justice and legitimacy of our side of the conflict, we cannot simply dismiss the legitimacy of the other. The title of our symposium, which includes the phrase "Israeli-Palestinian conflict," reflects this effort. Some would altogether deny the legitimacy of the term "Palestinian" in this context, whether on biblical, historical, or political grounds. But it is the term by which most Arabs living or originating in the area west of the Jordan—increasingly including those within the state of Israel itself—choose to describe themselves, and it's a mark of basic human respect to accept that self-designation.

At the same time, our title reminds us that we're Messianic *Jewish* leaders, who will speak of modern Israel with a special vision and loyalty. Just before last Tisha B'av, as Israel was being widely condemned for its defensive war against Hamas, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks spoke eloquently of Israel's unique place, not just within biblical prophecy, but within today's global picture.

Somehow, in the most dangerous region of the world, Israel has created a society of freedom and order: a free press, free elections and an independent judiciary on the one hand, and constant innovation in the arts and sciences, agriculture, medicine and technology on the other.

Israel is not perfect. We believe – the Hebrew Bible is the most self-critical national literature in all of history – that no one is perfect, that "There is no one on earth who is so righteous that he does only right and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7: 20). But today's Israel has been doing what Jews have been charged to do since the days of Abraham and Moses, to create freedom without anarchy and order without tyranny.⁴

Certainly we can embrace such a positive statement of appreciation for Israel without denying the imperfection to which it alludes, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict itself.

⁴ <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/creating-freedom-without-anarchy-order-without-tyranny/#ixzz39FTgXg7N> accessed 7/31/14.

TWO PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

To arrive at this balanced response to the question of *what* Messianic Jewish leaders should be discussing within our own community, let's consider two preliminary questions. One is "*How* should Messianic Jewish leaders discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?" Every discussion has a perspective, a vantage point that shapes its entire contents. How, then—from what vantage point—should we discuss this conflict today? Of course, we'll speak from the broad perspective of Scripture, but we'll have to define and focus that perspective to address this specific topic. We'll also speak from a Jewish perspective, which entails a broadly positive view of Israel, even if it makes the balancing act more challenging.

And there's a third question, which really comes before *What* and *How*. *Why* should Messianic Jewish leaders discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within our own community? Of course, it's a vitally important topic in general, particularly for Jewish people, but there's already so much discussion about it that we might ask whether we need to say more within our own community. Furthermore, the conflict seems to defy solution and therefore might not benefit from more discussion. We have compelling reasons, however, to discuss the conflict within our own community, and particularly from our own distinct perspective that is both Jewish and Messianic.

The first why is that if we can't or won't discuss this topic from our unique perspective, we're courting irrelevance. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict might not be the most important topic on the planet (although it would probably contend for the top 10), but for Jews, Israel is always a hot topic, and for Messianic Jews it should be even hotter. Most of the discourse on the conflict in the religious world, Jewish and Christian, seems as partisan and polarized as discourse in the wider, secular community. We have the opportunity to think about and articulate a response that isn't just reiterating a party line, whether of the right or of the left, but that is innovative and unique to our profession of loyalty to both Israel and Messiah Yeshua, and which might actually help articulate the redemptive value of that two-fold loyalty.

We also court irrelevance, and worse, a lack of integrity, if we can't address the issues of ethics and justice that surround the conflict. The days of bifurcating social justice issues and biblical truth issues are over—the two are so deeply intertwined as to be inseparable. The current increase of Evangelical Christian engagement in social activism is generally a positive development. But it has often yielded to the polarizing tendencies of the political realm. Some who question the alliance between conservative Christianity and conservative politics seem to think that the remedy must be an alliance between conservative Christianity and progressive politics. In this view, if the progressives are right about accessible health care, equity for the poor, and protection of the environment, they must also be right about Israel and the Palestinians. In other words, some evangelicals see a pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel stance as inherent to the move toward social justice that they are embracing. Since evangelicals have often been staunch supporters not only of Israel, but also of the Messianic Jewish community, we urgently need to speak about this issue—a second why.

The third why is perhaps the most important. As followers of Messiah Yeshua, we're called to represent his distinctive message and way of life, which are not just private religious

options, but have implications for all of life, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We're responsible to explore and articulate those implications as a top priority.

How should we view the conflict?

This brings us back to the *How* question—"How should Messianic Jewish leaders discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within our own community?" "How," as I've already noted, refers to perspective. Can we frame a Messianic Jewish perspective on the conflict that is distinct from other perspectives that dominate the discussion today, particularly within biblically informed communities, whether Jewish or Christian?

One such perspective is military-political, which in its most extreme form would view the conflict through the lens of the Book of Joshua and the original Conquest. This perspective imagines a bold obedience to Scripture that would seize the entire land granted to Joshua (Josh. 1:2–4), or at least the entire tract west of the Jordan, and establish unquestioned Jewish sovereignty over it all. Such a position often draws upon biblical language, and claims a biblical mandate,⁵ but of course it ends up resembling the reliance on military and political means that characterizes the nations of this world. It represents an unholy alliance between religious and military-political impulses that often converge on the right.

The converse of military-political is what we might call justice-political, which can take the form of an unholy alliance on the left. Just as the modern state of Israel is often given a free pass in the military-political paradigm, so Israel's adversaries often get a free pass from this perspective. It speaks of justice, but applies it one-sidedly, ignoring or minimizing the just claim of a homeland for the Jewish people, and highlighting Israeli injustices toward other peoples. This imbalance reveals again how the religious world has allowed itself to become as polarized as the political world. Religious factions may go so far as to place their hope for resolution in one political agenda or another, and thereby deprive the religious perspective of any special impact at all.

Another dominant perspective, often wed to the military-political, is eschatological. It frames the modern state of Israel as the fulfillment of prophecy, a sign that the prophetic clock is again ticking off the minutes until the end of the age. This perspective tends to view whatever happens in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in stark black-and-white tones and with a sense of inevitability. Everything is leading to the final cataclysm and the establishment of the Kingdom of God that follows, which is the only hope for resolution of the conflict.

The eschatological viewpoint originates in biblical prophecy, or at least in one aspect of biblical prophecy, but ignores much of the message of the biblical prophets. In the place of such perspectives, I'll propose an ethical-prophetic perspective that draws more broadly on the message of the prophets. This perspective shares the eschatological view that modern

⁵ The Tanakh negates such a mandate, however, making it clear that the Conquest is a unique, one-time occurrence. For example, in Genesis 15, Hashem tells Abraham that his seed can't take possession of the land yet, because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete (v. 16). Later he warns the Israelites "Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Lev. 18:24–25). He goes on to tell them that they could be vomited out too, if they continue in unrepentant sin. So, Joshua is portrayed not as a mere conqueror, but as an instrument of specific, long-awaited judgment on a uniquely sinful nation.

Israel is a fulfillment of prophecy, and that Israel's future is a key to the fulfillment of God's purposes for this age, but it has the potential to transcend the polarized military-political, justice-political, or eschatological categories of the current discussion.

AN ETHICAL WINDOW

Two years ago I wrote a paper framing a Messianic Jewish ethical window, a distinctly Messianic Jewish perspective on the moral questions of our day. The paper included a look through this window at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and this section of the current paper is adapted from that earlier paper.⁶ The conflict is a moral issue, and if we fail to engage the moral and ethical issues that it raises, we not only suffer in the arena of public opinion, but we risk falling short of our biblical calling.

The ethical window, like most windows, has four sides.

First, Torah forms the window sill, the strong horizontal on which the sides of the window frame rest. As the sill is foundational to any window, so is Torah to our ethical considerations. Torah, of course, refers primarily to the text of the Five Books of Moses as the narrative of Israel's origins and formation as a people in covenant with Hashem. An ethic based on Torah in this sense cannot be reduced to rules and regulations. Rather, Torah transmits its instructions through narrative, and for Messianic Jews, the grand narrative of Torah reaches its fullness in the story of Yeshua. Our Torah, and the ethical window frame resting upon it, most explicitly includes this story. As followers of Messiah Yeshua, we place his summation of Torah at the heart of our ethic:

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Matt. 22:37–40⁷

The virtue of love for the neighbor is an essential part of our Torah as followers of Messiah, inseparable from love of God himself.

Side two of our window frame is an ethic of divine encounter. Torah establishes the obligation to treat others with the highest regard for their dignity and worth, because the other is created in the image of God. In the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46), Messiah Yeshua takes this truth a step further. He speaks of himself in this parable as the "Son of Man," pointing to Messiah as the representative human,⁸ who embodies and bears

⁶ Included in *First Steps in Messianic Jewish Ethics* (np: Hashivenu, 2013). I thank my two respondents to the paper, Yahnatan Lasko and Jennifer Rosner, who also provided valuable insights into the current paper. Their responses are included in *First Steps*. I also thank Dr. Mark Kinzer and Dr. Judith Mendelsohn Rood for their very helpful input into the current paper, as well as my wife, Jane, who brings wonderful insights to everything I write.

⁷ Scripture quotations are from The ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁸ W. D. Davies, Dale C. Allison. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: Commentary on Matthew XIX-XXVIII* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 427-429. Daniel Boyarin. *The*

most fully the divine image common to all humankind, so that one encounters Messiah within any human being who is hungry, sick, or estranged.

The third side of our window is prophetic marginality. Marginality is inherent to our lives as Jews who give the highest honor to a figure so long rejected or neglected by the rest of the Jewish world, and indeed by the whole world in postmodern times. This inherent marginality provides prophetic impact, which leverages our place on the margins into a position of truth-bearing and godly influence. The prophet remains above the partisan categories that weaken religious influence in the contemporary world. For example, we're to meet Messiah Yeshua within the needy, marginalized, and disadvantaged, as in Matthew 25:31ff., but we're also instructed, "you shall not be partial to the poor" (Lev. 19:15). Prophetic justice stands above, but not aloof from, the conflict between haves and have-nots, victors and underdogs, which all too readily becomes partisan and politicized, as in the competing victimizations of our time. Its ultimate focus is the holiness of God, not simply the need to right the wrongs of this world.

Finally, side four completes the window with eschatological hope. The prophet is marginal in this age because he or she bears the perspective of a different age, the age to come, which will be established through Messiah's return. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Matthew frames this profound teaching of encounter with Messiah Yeshua in the person of the needy within the drama of Messiah's return. It's only at his return that the sheep are distinguished from the goats, only then that the faithful are revealed and rewarded, and the unfaithful judged. In the meantime, the promise of his return inspires our ethical action and also reminds us of its limitations. Our ethics will be partial and accommodating of the realities of this age, as they anticipate the age to come. In this age, we serve the kingdom of God that Messiah Yeshua announced at his first appearing and will fully establish only at his return.

The window metaphor has a weakness. It could suggest that we have the option to not look out the window at all, to simply avoid the difficult moral questions of our day, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In reality, however, ethics aren't optional, but shape all that we do. To ignore the conflict, or to view the conflict without any reference to its moral dimensions, would already be an ethical choice, the wrong choice for us to make as Messianic Jewish leaders. Instead, we are to look out of our distinct ethical window to understand and respond to the conflict, and speak of it in a way that reflects our deep commitment to Scripture and to the Messiah that Scripture reveals.

A WINDOW ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

In my earlier paper, I mentioned a conference on Israel and the end times that I had recently attended, which included some nationally-known speakers plus two prominent Palestinian Christian leaders. One of these leaders came recommended by a close mutual friend in Israel, so I arranged to meet him for breakfast before the conference began. He was warm and intelligent and we hit it off right away, as we talked about family, Scripture, and our own very different spiritual journeys. That evening, at one of the conference sessions, a well-known

Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ (New York: The New Press, 2012), esp. 38, 64-65. Cf. 1 Cor. 15:21ff (esp. 15:45); Rom. 5:12ff.

Christian academic was speaking on Israel's right to the land. He said God gave the land to Abraham and told him that its title would be passed on to Isaac, the son of promise, not to Ishmael, the son of unbelief. After my time with my Arab colleague, I cringed at that rhetoric and wondered how it struck him. I wanted to run over to him and apologize.

Equally important, this incident helped me better understand Ishmael's place in Scripture, which is a key to avoiding racist and ethnocentric rhetoric in discussing the conflict within our own community.

The conference took place right before Rosh Hashanah, and I was reading Genesis 21 and 22 in preparation. In Genesis 21, Abraham must cast Ishmael out of his camp, and yet the narrator of Genesis is clearly sympathetic to Ishmael and his mother, Hagar—as is Hashem himself. Hashem has already responded to Abraham's plea for his son—"O that Ishmael might live in your sight!"—with a promise: "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (Gen. 17:18-20). Isaac, not Ishmael, is the chosen seed, but Ishmael is also a son of blessing and, indeed, of promise. In describing Ishmael as the son of unbelief, the speaker doubtless had in mind Rav Shaul's midrash on Abraham's two sons in Galatians 4:21ff., but the description reflects neither the plain sense of Ishmael's story nor the redemptive future promised by God.

Traditional Jewish sources expand on the biblical portrayal of Ishmael. Pirke Avot speaks of ten trials of Abraham (Avot 5.4), and the Avot of Rabbi Nathan, also from the Talmudic era, makes it explicit that two of these trials are "in connection with his two sons."⁹ Centuries later, in his commentary on the Mishnah, Rambam lists ten trials in more detail, with the binding of Isaac as the ultimate test, and the expulsion of Ishmael as the penultimate. This linkage between the two trials reflects the biblical text, as a close reading of the expulsion of Ishmael in Genesis 21 reveals numerous parallels with the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22.¹⁰

The speaker's rhetoric about Ishmael, then, seemed untrue to the larger biblical picture and more in line with current political discourse and its tactic of invalidating the opposition.¹¹ It definitely didn't seem appropriate for a conference that featured Arab Christians on the program.

I'm covering all this is to provide an example of how Messianic Jewish leaders are to speak of the conflict within our own community. But, of course, this is just one example of the irresponsible rhetoric employed on both sides of the question. As another example, we often hear the Land of Israel before the major Jewish return that began in the nineteenth century described as a waste land, abandoned, and empty, as if the presence of an Arab population through that period was irrelevant or even non-existent. The other side is all-too

⁹ *The Fathers according to Rabbi Nathan*. Translated by Judah Goldin. (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1955), 132.

¹⁰ For example, Abraham lays the provisions for the journey on Hagar's shoulder, and the wood for the sacrifice on Isaac's shoulder; both boys are saved by the angel of the Lord calling out from heaven; a bush is involved in the deliverance in both cases; the trials end with a confirmation of God's promises for each son.

¹¹ In "A Reflection upon our Witness in the Muslim World," (*Mishkan*, Issue 54/2008, 49-50), Judith Rood cites Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), to argue that Christian Zionists' "interpretation of Ishmael has misled them in understanding the relationship of the Arabs to Israel."

capable of the same sort of distortion, as is evident in the widespread effort in the Arab world, and now spreading beyond, to deny any historical Jewish connection to the land, or in the use of time-worn anti-Semitic stereotypes to speak out against Israel. Such rhetoric is part of a strategy of competing victimizations, which is dehumanizing and unethical at its core.

Messianic Jewish participation in this debate ought to bring in a new and better perspective, and our ethical window may provide that. My cringing at the anti-Ishmael rhetoric, and wondering what my Palestinian counterpart thought of it, was the seed of an ethical response. I was, at least for the moment, loving my neighbor, who includes not only Arab Christians but, in far greater numbers, Arab Muslims. That evening I felt a particular responsibility for my Arab friend, even though I am—and believe I ethically ought to be—a whole-hearted supporter of the Jewish return to Eretz Yisrael. For the moment I was living out Hillel’s dictum, “And if I am only for myself, what am I?” My ethical window provides a Jewish perspective, but it impels me to look beyond Israelis or Jews only. Let’s consider, then, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the four-sided framework of this window.

Side one: An ethic founded upon Torah.

Torah depends on the two great commandments, to love Hashem whole-heartedly and to love your neighbor as yourself. The command to love your neighbor has been interpreted within both Jewish and Christian ethics to affirm universal love for your fellow human being, and surely it should apply to those who are literally Israel’s neighbors, the Palestinians. We’ll consider here, however, some other implications of Torah for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Torah includes the land grant to Abraham upon which the Jewish return to Eretz Yisrael is based, and thus is foundational to a biblical defense of Zionism as the Jewish return to their traditional homeland. But such a defense must draw not only upon the land grant and the restoration foretold by the prophets, but also upon principles of justice established in Torah, which apply to both Israelis and Palestinians. I can’t defend Israel’s legitimacy by delegitimizing the Palestinians, even though delegitimization is a common tactic in both directions. Nor can I accept the counter argument, made sometimes explicitly and more often implicitly, that the Palestinians alone have a claim on justice in this conflict because they’re in the weaker position relative to Israel.

Not long before the conference that I mention above, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (which I represent), along with the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America and the International Messianic Jewish Alliance, had issued a public criticism of the 2012 Christ at the Checkpoint (CatC) conference, which portrayed Israel as the prime obstacle to the “hope in the midst of conflict” that the conference purportedly was seeking. “For Palestinian Christians, the occupation is the core issue of the conflict.”¹² I must reject this statement as reductionist, but I am sympathetic with another statement on the conference website: “Conference organizers challenged the evangelical community to cease looking at the Middle East through the lens of ‘end times’ prophecy and instead rallied them to join in following Jesus in the prophetic pursuance of justice, peace and reconciliation.”

¹² <http://www.christatthecheckpoint.com/>, accessed 7/25/2014.

Justice, however, requires more nuance than CatC provides; the “occupation” (to accept that terminology for the moment) is doubtless a core issue of the conflict, but so are the Palestinian positions and actions that have helped to prolong it. As Judith Rood notes, “Many evangelicals are Christian Zionists who support Israel, while many Arab Christians are Arabists who support the Arabs and Palestinians. Both are one-sided, reflecting opinions in the secular world”¹³—opinions that inevitably fall far short of Torah. Therefore, the evangelical community should indeed cease looking at the Middle East *solely* through the lens of end times prophecy, but should also look through the lens (or “window” in my metaphor) of the weightier matters of Torah—justice and mercy and faith (Matt. 23:23)—which will have ramifications for both sides.

Side two: An ethic of divine encounter.

One of the implications of encountering Yeshua in the other is that how we characterize the other who might be an adversary becomes all-important. We cannot begin to formulate a genuinely ethical response to an issue like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the polarizing rhetorical framework that is so prevalent today. Richard Harvey presented a paper at CatC in 2012, which spoke of the need for Messianic Jews to engage in discourse with our “Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters.” It asks, “How do we distinguish between the agonistic discourses that delegitimise and alienate us from one another, [and] the strategic engagement of discourses that will allow us to formulate options together?”¹⁴ Doubtless such engagement will be one fruit of recognizing the divine image in those on the other side, realizing that in meeting them I meet Messiah. Surely it enhances the reputation of Messiah Yeshua when Israeli and Palestinian Yeshua-followers recognize him in each other, as some have done for years, on both sides of this intractable and tragically high-profile conflict. Expanding and building upon this recognition—and considering its implications for the Palestinian Muslim other—is an ethical imperative for our community.

Therefore, as Messianic Jewish leaders speaking about the conflict within our own community, we need to avoid the dehumanizing and invalidating language that is so common on both sides of this conflict. I find myself sometimes correcting statements that deny any Arab presence in the land prior to the last century or so, or deny any legitimacy to Palestinian aspirations for autonomy and statehood. If we encounter Messiah in the other—even in the adversarial other—we can’t dismiss the other as insignificant or invalid.

Side three: An ethic of prophetic marginality.

In seeking a balanced approach that doesn’t align fully with either side, we risk marginalization by both sides—but such marginalization would, of course, reflect our prophetic position. Harvey’s paper included a survey of Messianic Jewish leaders regarding

¹³ “Reflection upon our Witness,” 47. For a brief view of Arab and Palestinian infractions from the “other side” see Salim Munayer, “Theology of the Land: From a Land of Strife to a Land of Reconciliation,” in *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israeli-Palestinian Context*, edited by Salim J. Munayer and Lisa Loden. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 256–259.

¹⁴ Richard Harvey. *Towards a Messianic Jewish Theology of Reconciliation: The Strategic Engagement of Messianic Jewish Discourse in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (UK: lulu.com, 2012), 31–32.

their perspective on the conflict. Harvey noted that “the majority saw a special contribution to be made by Messianic Jews, as a voice from the margins, as a prophetic sign and witness, and as a pioneering means of reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.”¹⁵ Sadly, though, current Messianic Jewish discourse on the conflict all too often reflects the same polarization that characterizes political and academic discourse today. Indeed, Harvey himself became subject to marginalization because of his decision to participate in CatC. To rise above the polarization and partisanship of our day and articulate a Kingdom of God alternative is an ethical responsibility that we need to discuss within our Messianic Jewish community.

Side four: An ethic of eschatological hope.

As a Zionist, I support the continuing validity of the land promise to Abraham, and the eschatological hope of its final fulfillment. Ironically, though, eschatological hope in an eventual restoration has often accompanied a lack of hope for resolution in this age. Harvey notes that within the Messianic Jewish community, “The clearest theological message to be heard is that of a strong eschatological hope linked to a profound pessimism on any human peace process.”¹⁶ But eschatological hope has the potential to support efforts for peace in this age. Because our ultimate hope is focused on the age to come, we can await Israel’s full possession of the land as part of the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21), even though we believe Israel as a people possesses the title deed in full here and now. Until the final restoration, we can support concessions that have genuine potential to advance the cause of peace and to help ameliorate conditions for Palestinians as well as Israelis. I often have occasion in this regard to quote the eminent Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod:

I preach . . . a love of the land combined with a high degree of non-violence, a largely non-violent Zionism, a messianic Judaism that keeps alive the living expectation of the Messiah but also the messianic repudiation of violence, a love of all human beings whether Jewish or non-Jewish, a willingness to wait and even temporarily yield territory if this will save us from bloodshed.¹⁷

Wyschogrod accurately reflects the biblical picture. The covenant with Abraham and its expansion under Moses reveals that Israel’s full possession of the land is contingent on its covenant faithfulness to Hashem. The promise of the land is inviolable; possession of the land is conditional. Until Israel returns to its covenant commitments, its possession of the land will be partial and troubled, or even suspended in *galut*.¹⁸ This distinction between promise and possession is vital to our discussion of Israel today. In light of the promise to Abraham, we can insist that the Jewish return to the land of Israel in the past 150 years is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. The specific form of return embodied in the state of Israel, however, is a matter of possession, a pragmatic response to the promised return. The state of Israel is a

¹⁵ Ibid, 28.

¹⁶ Ibid, 29.

¹⁷ Michael Wyschogrod. *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*. Edited and Introduced by R. Kendall Soulen. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 106.

¹⁸ Exile or diaspora.

state, subject to the abuses and corruptions of power, in need of the prophetic voice to remain on course.

Therefore Messianic Jewish leaders need to view the conflict through the prophetic-ethical window that provides a balanced perspective on matters of state. We need to recognize two parties, Israelis and Palestinians, laying claim to justice. We need to discuss this conflict with ethical nuance, rather than with political or dogmatic rigidity—a simple enough statement, but one that will demand moral creativity and courage. Specifically, we need to charge our community with the unique task of replacing the partisanship and polarization that increasingly characterize the day in which we live with the perspective and values of Messiah’s reign, in our discussion not only of the conflict, but of all today’s political and social issues.

WHAT SHOULD MESSIANIC JEWISH LEADERS BE DISCUSSING WITHIN OUR OWN COMMUNITY ABOUT THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT?

Now that we have begun to view the conflict through a Messianic Jewish ethical window, we are ready to return to our opening question. What should we as Messianic Jewish leaders in the Diaspora say about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in our sermons, conversations, political engagements, and fundraising projects? I take it as axiomatic that we will speak as supporters of Israel as the biblically promised and historically legitimate homeland of the Jewish people, with the sovereign state of Israel existing to serve and protect that homeland. We’ve already begun to respond to some of the “what” items in the preceding “how” section. Now I’ll distill some points from that discussion and add a few more:

1. The biblical basis for the return to Zion

We need to regularly discuss within our community the biblical basis for the Jewish return to the land of Israel. The image of Zionism has become tarnished in recent decades, both by excesses within and by libel and bias from without, but it is nonetheless an idea that our community can honor.

In contrast, it is striking how inexorably the anti-Zionist denial of the Abrahamic land promises leads to denial of the continuing election of Abraham’s descendants, the Jewish people. Thus Naim Ateek, director of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, deems as obsolete both the land promises and the Jewish claim of a unique calling (which he caricatures in the process).

In light of their universal fulfillment in Christ, the narrow Old Testament promises regarding the land take on a very transitory and provisional meaning. They are time bound and, in view of their completion in Christ, become theologically obsolete. . . .

There is plenty of Zionist material in the Old Testament where the land is exclusively claimed and the Jewish people are glorified and set above others, and where non-Jews are despised. The New Testament shatters this exclusivity at every turn.¹⁹

But, of course, Ateek is a radical anti-Zionist. The same rejection of Jewish chosenness, however, is evident in the more moderate anti-Zionist critique of Wheaton Professor Gary Burge.

When I, no matter who I am, see my religious heritage as the basis of privilege, I cannot be a blessing to the nations. In fact, when a religion is linked to privilege it is generally linked to sin. To be specific, when someone draws a straight line from the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant to the modern state of Israel surely something is amiss.²⁰

Note the rhetoric here. To bring the modern state of Israel into view, Burge doesn't speak about the election of the Jewish people, or about God's faithfulness to his promises, but about the dangers of religious privilege. Burge invalidates a "straight line" from the Abrahamic covenant to the modern state of Israel, but doesn't trace out any other possible route from one to the other. If the modern state of Israel depends on a claim to religious privilege, what about the sense of election that has underlain Jewish identity and tradition from the beginning? "In Genesis," Burge claims, "the covenant of Abraham provided a local tribal promise," but in contrast,

It is only when Abraham is seen as the father of all who believe, when the Abrahamic redemption is completed in Christ, then what God is accomplishing in the world is realized. Then genuine *simcha* or joy will break out, and the truest vocation of Abraham will be seen.²¹

To dismantle the Jewish claim to the land of Israel, these critics seek to undermine the Jewish sense of calling, and hence Judaism itself as a religious culture. As Messianic Jewish leaders, we don't need to draw a straight line from the Abrahamic covenant to the modern state of Israel. We can acknowledge the complexity of the biblical picture and its outworking in our times. But our perspective remains founded upon Torah. We still invoke the covenant with Abraham and its validity throughout all generations (e.g. Gen. 17:7-8, 48:4; Rom. 9:4-5; 11:28-29) including our own. We can instill confidence within our community that the return to Eretz Israel is biblically mandated, despite the compromises, setbacks, and even sin that it has at times entailed.

The modern state of Israel itself is not directly part of this mandate, but is best understood as a just and pragmatic means of possessing the land promised to the Jewish

¹⁹ Naim Ateek, "The Earth is the Lord's: Land, Theology, and the Bible," in *The Land Cries Out*, 178, 179.

²⁰ CATC 2014, "Dialogue on Replacement Theology": Gary Burge & Daniel Juster. <http://vimeo.com/89570014>, accessed 8/7/2014, starting at 23:19.

²¹ *Ibid*, starting at 24:25.

people. As such, it is subject to the excesses and pitfalls of the state and cannot demand uncritical support. But it can demand our loyalty. This loyalty means that we will be advocates for Israel, writing letters to the editor and our representatives in Congress, defending Israel among our Christian friends and colleagues, financially supporting efforts in Israel, and so on. It also means that we might need to actively oppose policies we consider unjust or wrong. Beyond all this, as our critics sense, the Jewish return to Eretz Yisrael is a sign of the continuing chosenness of the Jewish people, which we unequivocally affirm.

2. The conditions for possessing the land

The same texts of Torah that we rightly invoke to defend the unbreakable quality of the promise of the land also define the conditions for the possession of the land.

This “possession” is actually a stewardship of what ultimately belongs to God, as reflected in the law of Jubilee: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev. 25:23). Since the land belongs to Hashem, he can grant it unconditionally to Israel, but Israel must practice covenant faithfulness to maintain its hold upon it. For example, Moses reminds the generation who will enter the promised land that it is sworn to their fathers, but their possession of it is conditional on covenant obedience.

“You shall therefore keep the whole commandment that I command you today, that you may be strong, and go in and take possession of the land that you are going over to possess, and that you may live long in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to give to them and to their offspring, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Deut. 11:8–9)

This distinction between promise and possession appears often in Deuteronomy, and becomes a vital theme of the Prophets. The prophetic-ethical perspective on Israel’s return to the land, then, recognizes Israel’s need for return to God, or *teshuvah*. Our ultimate hope for Israel rests not on military prowess or diplomatic alliances, but on the promise of return.

The alternative to *teshuvah*, we note in the face of supersessionist theologies, is not rejection by God, but exile from the land until Israel returns to God—a return that the prophets clearly foretell. Therefore, as surely as we need to discuss the ongoing legitimacy of the land promise, so do we need to discuss what God expects of Israel in the land. The transgressions of the state of Israel (or of individual Israelis), whatever they might be, do not invalidate it as a sovereign Jewish state, as its detractors sometimes claim. But the reality of such transgressions alerts us to our need for *teshuvah*, individually and as a people. As Messianic Jews, we declare that Israel’s eschatological *teshuvah*, which is tied to its full possession of the land, will entail recognition of Messiah Yeshua and be accomplished through his mediation.

3. The besorah

Teshuvah, of course, is part of the good news announced by Messiah, the *besorah* to be propagated by his followers. I employ the Hebrew term *besorah* because it avoids the alien

tone of “gospel” to Jewish ears and echoes the repeated use of this word and its cognate terms in Isaiah 40-66, a body of Scripture that is foundational to the Apostolic Writings.²² The besorah as previewed in Isaiah is not a message of individual salvation via heavenly transfer. Rather it is about God’s return to Israel and Israel’s return to God, a two-fold return that is key to the restoration of all humankind (Is. 49:5-7, 52:10, 60:1-3, 66:23). Furthermore, as we’ve seen in section 2 above, return means the restoration of covenant faithfulness. Jeremiah 31:31ff and Ezekiel 36-37 portray this restoration in eschatological terms, and the opening chapters of the synoptic Gospels reveal its inception at the coming of Messiah (e.g. Matt. 3:8, 5:14-20, 7:21; Luke 3:8-14).

Christian Zionism has been criticized for neglecting the proclamation of the besorah among Jewish people, including Israelis. I have witnessed this tendency first-hand, and would have to say that the criticism is justified, although often exaggerated. But the besorah as we understand it here is especially relevant to Jews, and perhaps to Israelis in particular.

The Messianic Jewish community in Israel will, of course, continue to take the lead in sharing the besorah in Israel, and initiating new congregations as needed. The diaspora community can lend support through finances, prayer, and active communication, which includes the possibility of influencing our brothers and sisters in Israel (as well as being influenced). In particular, because we have some distance from the pressures and tensions of Yeshua-believing life in Israel, we may be able to encourage this sense of the besorah as a corporate call back to covenant faithfulness, in place of the individualistic and antinomian gospels current in the West, and as the key to the restoration of all Israel.

4. Solidarity with Yeshua-believers in Israel

Another criticism of Christian Zionism is that it often overlooks the body of Yeshua-believers in Israel in its support and advocacy for the state of Israel. In contrast, Messianic Jewish Zionism in the diaspora should build active networks of communication and understanding with the Israeli Messianic Jewish community, as noted above. To do so, we must recognize the differences of religious culture and doctrinal emphasis between Israeli and Diaspora Messianic Jewish groups. Specifically, the Messianic community in Israel may have perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that differ from the perspectives of Diaspora communities. We need to respect these perspectives, and learn from it, even if we may at times respectfully disagree. Our prayers for Israel, which should be integral to our life as community, must always include our fellow Yeshua-believers in the land.

5. Engagement with the other

The besorah of teshuvah and corporate restoration leads to engagement with “the other side,” the Palestinians—or at least, as a first step, with Yeshua-believers on the other side. We may be on opposite sides of the conflict, but we’re still able to engage each other within the framework of faith in Messiah Yeshua. Therefore, we need to talk to our community about creating and cultivating channels of dialogue with Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, starting with the most accessible part of that population, Arab-Palestinian Christians. This requires that we

²² See Isaiah 40:9; 52:7, 61:1.

not limit our channels to those who agree with our Zionist claims, but that we seek real dialogue on this very issue.

Our ethical window frame beckons us to look for the image of God as we encounter not only Palestinian Christians, however, but the Muslim majority as well. As we insist on the prophetic justice and legitimacy of our cause we have to be willing to grant legitimacy to the other, again not necessarily agreeing, but not automatically denying all claims either. As we've seen, such willingness is reflected in the title of our symposium, which includes the phrase "Israeli-Palestinian conflict," thereby recognizing a Palestinian identity, even as we insist on the legitimacy of Israeli and Jewish identity.

Hillel's dictum comes into play here: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?" On the final morning of our 2014 UMJC conference, someone suggested to me that we should recite Kaddish for the Israeli soldiers who had died in Operation Protective Edge—eighteen at the time. I agreed with the suggestion, and felt it was important to introduce the Kaddish with a statement of concern and prayer for all the innocent loss of life. We recite Kaddish for our own, but we remember all who have suffered, even those on the other side of the conflict.

Our desire to propagate the besorah under point 3 and to engage with the other here in point 4 raises the question, "Should we be interested in sending Messianic Jewish mission teams to work among Palestinians?" Let's answer that in good Jewish fashion with a better question, "In what ways might the diaspora Messianic Jewish community support the mission efforts of our Yeshua-believing counterparts among the Palestinians?" As with propagating the besorah in Israel, the first step is to deepen our engagement with those already active on the ground, and to take whatever further steps open up as we are able to genuinely come alongside our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters.

6. Practical issues of aliyah

Our message within our own community represents a form of Zionism, deeply shaped by the besorah, but sharing core values with other forms of Zionism. Hence our message inevitably includes support for aliyah, including aliyah of members of our community. Such support should include two specific emphases:

- a) Active, practical help, which entails a realistic sense of what it takes to successfully make aliyah. Normally, the goal for olim should be self-sufficiency in the land, the ability to earn a living, to function in Hebrew, to contribute to the general good of Israel. There will be exceptions, as some olim are legitimately called to develop support from the diaspora or from the Christian world for particular ministry assignments. The standard, however, should be self-sufficiency, and our community should support that standard.
- b) A balanced, ethical view of where to live. I'm not taking a position here on the issue of settlement beyond the green line, but I believe the community is responsible to raise this issue with the olim that it supports. If an oleh is considering locating in Judea or Samaria, he should be helped to consider all the ethical and political-military issues related to that move, so that he doesn't make it based on some idealistic or doctrinal position alone.

7. A call to prayer

Pro-Israel Christians pray for Israel as a matter of course, citing scriptures such as Psalm 122:6, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,” and Isaiah 62:6, “On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen.” Messianic Jewish leaders should also practice and speak of such prayer for Israel and its people—prayer for security, peace, wise leaders, and most of all for spiritual awakening throughout Israel, and among the Palestinians as well.

Furthermore, praying for Israel means that we recognize unseen forces at work in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time as we affirm the humanity of those on the other side of the conflict, and hope for eventual reconciliation, we recognize forces opposing Israel that are not flesh and blood, but are “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). These powers oppose the Jewish return to the land of Israel, and especially oppose a peaceful, restored Jewish presence in the land, and they must be actively resisted in prayer. The horrifying outbreak of anti-Semitism in the wake of the Gaza war, and the relentless rise of Islamist terrorism, make the demonic aspect of the conflict undeniable, even as they render any resolution of the conflict most unlikely apart from intensive spiritual battle.

Like our Christian friends and advocates, we see prayer for Israel and her people as essential to our life as Yeshua-believers. As Messianic Jewish leaders we have something distinctively Jewish to add. Prayers for the restoration of Israel and Jerusalem have been part of traditional Jewish devotion for centuries and remain part of the daily prayers, as well as the liturgies of the holy days. We can encourage our community to participate faithfully in such prayers with the wider Jewish community, as we look toward the restoration to come.

8. A vision of hope

As we speak to our community about the conflict, we need to rise above the partisanship of the day, which is fueled by inordinate hope in political, diplomatic and military process, and inadequate hope in the ultimate establishment of the kingdom. Indeed, viewing the political-diplomatic-military realm may leave us with feelings of hopelessness, but our Messianic Jewish ethical window frame is held together by eschatological hope.

Early in 2014, a Palestinian university professor, Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, led a group of his students on a tour of Auschwitz, “to learn about the Holocaust and what happened, why it happened, what lessons we can learn from it.”²³ Dajani’s story illustrates the ethic of hope, and also provides a significant face for the “other” with whom we must engage. His full name, Mohammed Suleiman Dajani Daoudi, reflects his family history. They were an established and influential clan in Jerusalem at the time of the Ottoman conquest in the 16th century, and received a charge from Suleiman, the conqueror, to be custodians of the Tomb of David—Daoud in Arabic—hence the name Daoudi. Dajani’s story dismantles the outmoded Zionist rhetoric of “a land without a people for a people without a land,” and the more recent portrayal of all Arabs as late entries into the land of Israel. It also counters the idea that there are no moderates among the Arabs; Dajani has his problems with Israel, but actively seeks to understand and to promote solutions that will benefit both sides of the conflict.

²³ Nadine Epstein. “Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, Evolution of a Moderate,” in *Moment*, July/August 2014.

Dajani's visit to Auschwitz drew so much flak, including opposition by students and faculty at Al Quds University in Jerusalem where he taught, that he soon resigned his post. For years Dajani's work has been informed by a line from the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: "What is more important—a small hope or a big dream?" Dajani portrays the "big dream" for both sides as complete possession of all the land from the Jordan to the sea, without the disturbing presence of the other. He continues, "The small hope is for both of them to wake up one morning and to have two states, two people, two nations, living next to each other."²⁴

For our community the "big dream" is the kingdom of God to be established at Messiah's return, which will fulfill all that is promised regarding the people and land of Israel. But the big dream often impedes the small hope of a fair and pragmatic solution to the conflict before Messiah returns. Instead, as Michael Wyschogrod points out, the big dream should actually empower the small hope. Our message and our prayers can embrace the small hope of a pragmatic and imperfect Israeli-Palestinian peace "speedily and in our days," because we are confident in the big vision of the restored kingdom in the age to come.

The prophetic-ethical hope

The "big dream" of the kingdom of God is portrayed throughout the writings of the Prophets, which begin within the Jewish canon with the book of Joshua. Ironically, as we've seen, Joshua is a favorite source-book for one of the perspectives that I propose we abandon. Joshua provides a model of conquest, of driving out the Gentile inhabitants of the land, which does not directly apply to today's circumstance, especially from a Messiah-Yeshua perspective. But we can detect another, more foundational, theme in Joshua, more in line with the hope of the kingdom, reflected in an encounter recorded early in the book.

When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?" And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, "Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so. (Josh. 5:13–15)

"Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" Rashi interprets this question as, "Have you come to support us [or our enemies]?" The question might also be translated, "Are you with us or with our enemies?" (Artscroll), or "Are you one of us or of our enemies?" (NJPS). Regardless, the initial response stands: "No!" "The person who had appeared neither belonged to the Israelites nor to their enemies, but was the prince of the army of the Lord, *i.e.* of the angels."²⁵ As commander of the army of the Lord, he will eventually support Joshua in his

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch. *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol II.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985 [reprint]), 62.

divine assignment to take the land of Canaan, but first he must counter the notion that he takes sides at all. God's purposes are prior to the inevitable divisions among humankind. When he provides victory under Joshua, it's not that he is primarily "for Israel," but rather that Israel is enlisted to be "for God."

This incident, coming right at the beginning of the prophetic books, helps define the whole prophetic viewpoint. Israel possesses the land grant irrevocably through the oath to Abraham, but gaining and maintaining possession of the land is conditional. The prophetic focus isn't primarily on military might or diplomatic prowess, but on recognizing God's holiness ("take off your sandals"), and doing teshuvah when you fall short of that holiness. Hashem commands and promises the conquest of Canaan, as in Joshua 1:2-6, but then adds the condition of obedience, as in Joshua 1:7-8. So, the appearance of the commander of the Lord's army is evidence that "the Lord is with you wherever you go" (1:9b), but the commander makes it clear that he's not "with you" in an absolute sense. Rather, he stands both with and apart from Israel, both guaranteeing the inheritance of the land, and judging Israel's worthiness to take it. When Israel proves itself unworthy, as in the struggle for Ai, Hashem himself withholds victory (7:12) until Israel returns to covenant obedience.

What, therefore, should we be discussing within our own community about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Victory in this case doesn't mean conquest of the enemy, but a resolution that allows for peace and equity, for life to go on in this age as we await the fullness of the age to come. The message is that ultimately even this resolution is in the hands of a God who is not narrowly for us or for our enemies, but for his own redemptive purpose. We have a part to play in that purpose, and our part begins with teshuvah—falling on our faces in God's presence and removing the sandals of our own human-centered agenda. Even amidst this conflict we focus on his holiness.

We opened with a saying of Hillel, and it is fitting to give him the last word: "If not now, when?" As we talk about hope in the midst of the conflict, about the possibilities of resolution, we're not speaking only of a glorious future, but also of real and practical steps we can take today. As leaders within the Messianic Jewish community, perhaps the most immediate step is simply to begin discussing the conflict with genuine hope and ethical concern, to rise above the polarizing and dehumanizing rhetoric that surrounds us, and to influence our whole community to do the same, thus shining Messiah Yeshua's light on one of today's most visible and intractable problems. This step is one we can take today—and if not now, when?