

**BOROUGH PARK SYMPOSIUM**

**Response to Erez Soref**

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JEWISH AND ARAB  
BELIEVERS IN ISRAEL:  
THE CURRENT SITUATION AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE  
EREZ SOREF AND SETH POSTELL**

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## Introduction

A document recently appeared on an Israel pastoral network that aroused a lot of controversy. Calling for unity with our Arab brothers, it was accompanied by a request for endorsement. The item that caused most dispute was the use of the name “Palestine.” Most of those who read it objected to the idea of an independent Palestinian state, arguing that Arabs simply do not realize how bad it would be for them. I did not like the paternalistic approach of these responses. Why should we think we can determine how our Arab brethren perceive their identity? I want to make a different point here, however. Let’s say a miracle takes place and Arab Christians are not persecuted in such a state, if Hamas actually protects them from other more radical Muslims. Could such a Palestinian state be good for them? Lest this sound too far left-field, let me quote a statement posted on a Muslim site: “Palestinian Christian Leader says he is proud to be part of Hamas.” The person in question is Father Manuel Mussalam of the Latin Patriarchy in Jerusalem and former leader of the Gaza Christian community. According to Mussalam, he feels this membership as an “honorary reward”: “I belong to the great Palestinian people. Our land can be defended by real men, not just the West or even the Vatican.” He then goes on to claim that Hamas has never ill-treated Palestinian Christians. On the contrary, Hamas rule has only improved their situation: “We will always have a warm relationship with our Muslim brothers. Under Hamas, this relationship has drastically improved.”<sup>1</sup>

The real question is thus: Should we encourage the emergence of such state? This is followed by another: “Since when did the allocation of the land became a political game rather than the theological foundation of a Jewish Messianic idea?”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.islamnews.ru/news-446226.html> (Russian).

## **Earth in heaven or heaven on earth?**

The Greek—and fundamental Christian—approach is characterized by a dualistic dichotomy between spirit and flesh. While examples of such tension abound in the Tanakh, and the New Testament in particular (Rom 7:20-24; Gal 5:17), the Jewish mindset has a hard time understanding this dualism. Let me give you an example from a fifth-century C.E. midrash, *Midrash Tanchuma*:

Rabbi Yochanan said, As it is written, *Who does great things and unfathomable wonders without number* (Job 9:10). You should know that all the souls descended from the first man until the end of the world were all created in the six days of creation, all of them in Gan Eden, and they were all at the giving of the Torah, as it is said *I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the LORD our God but also with those who are not here today* (Deut 29:14-15).

A similar midrash is told about human conception:

Before the formation of the child in the mother's womb, the Almighty is approached by the angel who is in charge of birth, with a drop in his hand: "Oh, Sovereign of the Universe," he says, "the soul which will be placed here - what is it to be?" And the Almighty thereupon decrees whether this future child will be male or female, weak or strong, wealthy or poverty-stricken, tall or short, beautiful or ugly, thin or fat. He decrees all that will happen to the child—where it will live, who it will marry, etc, and all that will transpire. One thing, however, he does not decide. He does not decide whether the future child, the future human being, will be good or evil, for this is in the hands of the person himself; he alone has the choice of good or evil. One thing, however, he does not decide. He does not decide

whether the future child, the future human being, will be good or evil, for this is in the hands of the person himself; he alone has the choice of good or evil. Following this, the Almighty calls the angel who is appointed over the various souls that are assembled in the heavens. “Bring Me such and such a soul which can be found in Gan Eden.” When the soul is brought before the Almighty, it bows before Him. The Almighty says: “I desire that you enter this drop so that you will leave this world and enter the world of humanity.” Immediately, the soul begins to protest and says: “Oh, Lord of the Universe, I am more than happy with the world in which I find myself today. Behold, today I am holy and pure and formed in Your image. Why do You desire that I enter this drop and become part of a physical and mortal body? I am destined to give you honor.” Immediately God tells the soul: “The world I am placing you into is more beautiful than the one in which you have come from. The whole reason for which I created you was for you to enter into this drop.”<sup>2</sup>

The point to which I want to draw attention here is that we cannot discern the difference between the soul and body—the spiritual and the carnal. The only way we can judge somebody’s spirituality (faith) is to observe his material (carnal) life. All other approaches suffer from the sickness of “spiritualization.” My faith must be grounded fully and wholly in my everyday life—my treatment of moral, political, cultural, and financial issues. My heavenly Jerusalem is built here on earth and should address real people—not phantoms.

How do we put aside politics and theology in order to reach this spiritual unity? How important is fellowship if it demands that we compromise the basic tenets of our faith? What are the minimal fundamentals we must hold that allow us to fellowship

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.torahtots.com/jewishpress/20090807midrash.htm>.

with others? What if we believe that political, theological, and ethical issues *are* spiritual doctrines and anyone who holds a different view is immediately disqualified from being a follower of Yeshua?

The famous passage in Jas 2:26: “Faith without deeds is dead”—paralleled in Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*: “Your intentions are desirable but your deeds are not desirable”—should be our guide in determining our relationship with others who call themselves our brothers.

### **Numbers, numbers**

Erez has done a great job of trying to grasp how our relationship with our Arab brothers is perceived by both Jewish and Arab believers. The body of Israeli Messianic believers consists of groups from different backgrounds and countries of origin—Ethiopians, Russians, etc. I thought it would be interesting to conduct a survey amongst Russian Jewish believers to see if they diverge from Erez’s numbers. Although far from being professional, I believe it gives us a fairly accurate picture of the mind (heart?) set of this group of believers.

I asked the following the questions:

*“To what degree do you emphasize in your congregation that Israel is God’s chosen nation and that the State of Israel is the fulfillment of prophecy?”*

The answer to this was similar to Erez’s—a whopping 88%.

The next question was: *“To what level does political theology play a part in Evangelical Arab churches?”*

17 of the 19 responded that they believe it to play a “disproportionally large” role.

The largest gap between the two surveys related to the question:

*“To what degree would you be willing to fellowship with an Arab brother who does not share your biblical understanding regarding Israel?”*

18 out of 19 answered that they would not be willing.

These numbers demonstrate that our ethnic, cultural, and political views directly affect our “spiritual” approach. No such thing as “fellowship” thus exists that does not involve our stance on issues of daily life—including political matters, of course.

We like to say that we can worship God together at the same time as respecting one another’s heritage and traditions. When we recognize that—whether consciously or unconsciously—we act as though the latter form part of the “biblical revelation” itself, however, we face a sobering reality.

Another example is the present state of affairs between Russian and Ukrainian believers. The recent war and annexation of Crimea by Russia caused humongous rift to the relationship of two Slavic believing communities. The appeals to keep the relationships and the unity above the politics caused just bitterness and sharp critics from both sides. It is indeed very difficult (and I believe it is impossible) to support aggression or terrorism and the same time to claim you love you brother.

## **Conclusion**

I view Arab-Jewish fellowship as a very important aspect but not necessarily the highest priority in our everyday spiritual walk. Of course it would be good if we could worship and pray together. The price of doing so, however, must be measured against our theological position—which, as I have argued, includes what we call political and cultural issues. The Great Commission is not just proclaiming God’s name. For me, our first task is to understand what His name means in a Messianic context. “Complementing one another missiologically” must take our differences into account and treat them as givens in proclaiming the Good News.