

Borough Park Symposium 2015
What Messianic Jewish Leaders Should Discuss with the Christian Church
about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

(Response to Jonathan Bernis)

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I want to thank the organizers of this symposium for the opportunity to speak on this important subject and for making space for the variety of views represented here. In a time of increasing polarization, opportunities to present a wide spectrum of views, and particularly to present minority views are few. I also want to thank Jonathan Bernis for his clear presentation of the issues he feels to be important for discussion on the subject at hand. He well expresses the existential, practical, political concerns of many from within the Messianic community. Having been asked to give a response to a majority view paper, my assumption is - you wanted to hear a different voice. I will not disappoint you.

The theme of this symposium, Messianic Jewish Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, is one of the hottest and most relevant topics that could have been chosen. The people of God are instructed to not be ignorant of the times and seasons in which they live, even as times and seasons change from generation to generation. This topic is therefore of great importance to all followers of the Messiah in our time. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is certainly one of the signs of the times to which Yeshua referred (Matthew 17:3, Luke 12:56).

To whom are we speaking?

As Messianic Jews, many of us choose to disassociate ourselves from Christianity as an institution. Regrettably this frequently leads to a tendency on our part to view Christians or the Christian Church as the other, as someone or something essentially different from us. The inherent danger is to stigmatize that which we perceive as other and define ourselves in opposition to it; generally resulting in a stance of superiority on our part. In this case, the truth is the reverse of this understanding. The Christian Church, like the Messianic Jewish community consists of individuals who, for a wide variety of reasons, have chosen to identify as part of a faith based community. Together, those who embrace Yeshua as Lord, regardless of their cultural or ethnic identity are, in the deepest sense, essentially one and intrinsically related in the one Body of Messiah.

The categories of orthodoxy and orthopraxy can be helpful when distinguishing what is central in regards to our unity, and hence our conversations, within the body of Messiah. There are remarkably few doctrines¹ (orthodoxy) that, if held in common, determine whether or not we classify as members of the body of Messiah. In what cultural terms we choose to express that identity (orthopraxy) matters little so long as the expression does not abrogate scriptural commands and principles. I do not believe there is an ontological difference between Jews and non-Jews following their new birth into the body of Messiah and I find no compelling reason to

¹ From the third century, various creedal statements have attempted to encapsulate these key doctrines. For Jews, the primary statement that defines our unity and belonging to the people of God is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

accept the claim of ontological difference prior to the new birth. Humankind is created in the image of God who within Himself is a compound yet fundamentally indivisible unity. The same is true of the Body of Messiah. Paul's use of the image of the human body is a profound metaphor for our interrelationship within the Body of Messiah. It is a critical loss that Western man has little understanding or experience of what it means to be in community. Too often we separate into subgroups based on comfort, barricading ourselves against views that would challenge the security we find in the familiar.

When we speak with one another, Messianic Jews and the Christian Church, it is not as two opposing entities but rather as brothers and sisters united by the blood of our Messiah. This implies a degree of commonality that should be the basis for our interactions. Spiritually we are all members of the one body of Messiah/Christ with the same moral imperatives incumbent on us all. Further, we are all disciples of the one Messiah, called together to be a sign of the Kingdom of God² and to live according to its principles in this present world. The reign of Yeshua as King is demonstrated in the lives of his followers who together comprise His living body in the world. In this way, they serve as a sign of the Kingdom.

How do we speak?

Beginning from a point of commonality is always a strong basis for communication. Unquestionably, there is such a basis in the interaction between Christians and Messianic Jews. This leads to the question of the mandate for the Body of Christ as articulated in the scriptures. I would posit that in order to fulfil our joint destiny as disciples of the Messiah, being a sign of the kingdom, we must engage together in activities and conversations about the Kingdom and what it means to be its sign; as well as jointly seeking to fulfil the scriptural mandate of being light and salt in the corrupt world that is our mutual context.

Attitudes are as important for effective communication as the actual content of what is at issue. Arrogance and theologies of privilege have no place in the discussions, whether they are internal or with the Christian world. Followers of Messiah are to speak from a position of humility, giving grace, and when speaking truth doing it in love.

Returning to the life and teachings of Yeshua in discussions of the Israeli Palestinian conflict is essential to our communication as Messianic Jewish leaders with the larger Christian Church. However, in much of the conversation emerging from the Messianic Community that seeks to engage with the Christian Church, the scriptural basis for discussion, the reasoning, and the arguments, are grounded in the promise aspects of the Israel's prophets. While Torah and the Prophets are fundamental for doctrine and practice, Yeshua stated unequivocally that they all testify of Him. God himself, his character and his will, are authoritatively revealed in Yeshua. It follows that His life and teachings are in harmony with the prophetic vision of the Tenach.

For communication to be meaningful and effective, it is necessary to speak a common language. Together with the Christian Church we share the biblical metanarrative. Our past, whether Jews or Gentiles, has led us through a wilderness into fields that today stand ripe for harvest. The context of the Israeli Palestinian conflict is such a place. There are millions, caught in the Israeli Palestinian conflict who have no consciousness of God and no hope for the future. Messianic

² "The kingdom of God is the lordship of God established in the world in Jesus Christ. It is the rule of God as it takes place in him." Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV, 2, 655-656

Jewish leaders need to challenge their Christian brothers and sisters to engage with and invest in this burgeoning spiritual harvest. Israelis and Palestinians alike are in need of peace and hope. Peace in our time is at best a temporary cease fire and hope has been deferred so often that hearts are sickening unto death.

What is the content of our communication?

It is incumbent upon the Messianic Community to recognize and understand the nature of the conflict before it can effectively engage in conversation with their brethren in the Christian Church. This is not a simple exercise since the conflict is multilayered. It exists on many levels encompassing both spiritual and physical dimensions. Messianic Jews are inclined to focus on the spiritual, relating first to theological and eschatological issues, using them as the basis for involvement with the physical, practical issues. In the main, the Christian Church tends to be far more aware of the practical issues involved in the conflict than the majority of Messianic Jews. However, neither community is monolithic and there is a wide-ranging spectrum of political and theological positions and opinions within both communities. At this time, the predominant view of Messianic Jewish leaders regarding Israel is profoundly Zionist and dispensational in its understanding of history.

The Israeli Palestinian conflict is most frequently described as intractable. This kind of conflict is defined as being long term, multigenerational, with little prospect of resolution. David Nicoll, using research done by Peter T. Coleman, Daniel Bar-Tal, and Vamik Volkan, identifies nine characteristics of intractable conflicts. These are: protracted, use of bellicose rhetoric, repeated dignity violations and identity threats, humiliating defeats, victimhood, chosen traumas, multiple failed peacemaking efforts, narratives of never ending conflict, and win/don't lose survival goals.³ All of these elements are present in varying degrees on both sides of the Israeli Palestinian conflict. We are caught in a cycle that is devilishly difficult to break.

The Messianic community has taken an increasingly defensive stance in the arena of discussions about the conflict, framing it in terms of its own issues rather than seeing the conflict as a shared problem. In the main, and Jonathan's paper exemplifies this, the focus of discussions center on Israel's place in the plan of God and the perceived responsibility of the Christian Church to support and defend her. Furthermore, most conversations seem to revolve around issues of Israel's reputation in the world and her threatened security. I find this approach to be sadly lacking. As those who believe in the goodness, faithfulness, and sovereignty of God, we should be able to rest in God's faithfulness to his word concerning Israel – that he is committed to watch over His unbreakable word to perform it.

Within the Christian Church, with whom we are imagining a conversation, is a significant community of Palestinian Christians. These are our brothers and sisters who happen to live on the wrong side of invisible lines, concrete walls and barbed wire fences that split the land of Israel/Palestine. We Messianic Jews need to engage with them before we concern ourselves with Christian opinion or support from other parts of the world. We may well be surprised at what we can learn from one another.

³ <http://orginc.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Intractable-Conflict-Characteristics.pdf>, accessed December 31, 2014

In the setting of this symposium I do not wish to debate questions of pacifism and just war theory, nonviolence or redemptive violence. I rather suggest that the purpose of our conversations with the Christian Church should be our mutual responsibility to follow the scriptural mandate to live together as a community of reconciliation, bearing witness to the world of the values and victory of Messiah over the forces of evil. This mandate has no ethnic dimension. Richard Hayes suggests three images through which to view the biblical texts, including the holy war texts, on the subject of violence in defense of justice: they are community, cross and new creation.⁴ These hermeneutical lenses serve to sharpen the teaching of Yeshua on issues related to the way of life in the Kingdom of God, proclaimed and inaugurated by Yeshua through his life, death, and resurrection.

As a sign of the kingdom, understanding that Yeshua's primary message was the Gospel of the Kingdom; its citizens are to seek that kingdom as their highest priority (Matthew 6:33). The Kingdom of God in scripture has many aspects. It is associated with forgiveness of sins (Matthew 18:21-35), repentance and faith (Matthew 4:17), righteous living (Matthew 5:3; 5:17-20), and the new birth (John 3:5). It is also the destiny and inheritance of its citizens (Matthew 25:34). When speaking of the Kingdom of God, Yeshua spoke in parables that, although sometimes difficult to understand, were meant to reveal deep truths concerning the character and the ways of the Kingdom. God is the sovereign king who eternally occupies His throne above the many floods of conflict and strife. Throughout the life and teachings of Yeshua and later through the life and witness of the early disciples (Acts) and the writings of Paul, never is force or violence used to further the gospel, or to exemplify the Kingdom of God.

Yeshua proclaimed a coming of the Kingdom of God that was contrary to the longings and expectations of the time. His vision of the kingdom was a peaceable vision with an inversion of traditional values and expectations that ran counter to his times and culture. Israel in the times of Yeshua was living as a conquered, subservient and oppressed nation under "pax Romana" that was established by the sword. Richard Hayes concisely captures Yeshua's views. "The evangelists are unanimous in portraying Jesus as a Messiah who subverts all prior expectations by assuming the vocation of suffering rather than conquering Israel's enemies. Despite his stinging criticism of those in positions of authority, he never attempts to exert force as a way to gaining social or political power."⁵

In the context of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, as Messianic Jewish leaders, our conversation with the Christian Church should first represent shared concerns for God's kingdom in the region. This involves a commitment to support the witness of the Messiah among all peoples of the region, raising our voices on behalf of the weak and those who suffer, opposing violence, and seeking justice. In this, we follow the path of our Messiah who called us to take up our cross and follow him. Our attitudes and our actions need to embody the character and life of Yeshua. He had no need to be defensive and when he did raise his authoritative prophetic voice, it was most often to condemn hypocrisy and call Israel to repentance.

The Messianic Jewish community, in common with true followers of Yeshua regardless of their ethnic identity, is called to be a prophetic community. "A prophetic community is . . . called to

⁴ Richard B. Hayes. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, (Harper Collins, New York: 1996) p. 329

⁵ Ibid. p. 339

situate itself critically in relation to power and the power structures (political, social, intellectual, economic) of a society. Its business is . . . to make known to the powerful those self-deceptions and corruptions of consciousness about which ignorance means tyranny and injustice, savagery and death. A prophetic community shines as a light and . . . demands justice but to do so it must first unmask the self-deception that would lead those in power to believe that theirs is already a just society.”⁶ If the Messianic voice to the Christian Church is to be prophetic in the sense described above and if the conversation between the Messianic Jewish community and the Christian Church is to be fruitful, issues of the heart are crucial. This is a monumental task and requires prayer and spiritual discipline. We Messianic Jews should initiate and challenge the Christian Church to engage in concentrated prayer for all the parties involved in the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Additionally we should challenge the Christian Church to pray for the whole Body of Messiah in Israel and the Palestinian Authority to respond to the call for unity and cooperation across the many lines of division that today fragment their lives and witness.

Messianic circles most commonly emphasize the promissory aspect of the prophetic scriptures, often deriving their identity from them and situating themselves as proleptic of their ultimate eschatological fulfillment. However, the prophetic voice was not only promissory; it was also confrontational in its condemnation of Israel’s sin, and demanding in its call to repentance. Coming from the Messianic community, this voice is rarely heard.

Many Messianic Jews understand themselves as a remnant community, in continuity with the Jewish people, having inherited the calling to be a light to the nations so that the Lord’s salvation will reach the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6). Yeshua broadened the call to be light to include all those who would follow him. Light can only be seen when it is attached to a source of power, when the instrument is unobscured and clear, when it is placed in a visible location and when it is intentionally enabled.

Thus, the focus of conversation between Messianic Jewish leaders and the Christian Church in the world, including those who reside in Israel and the Palestinian authority, rests on our mutual responsibility as his disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God and together to be its sign in the world. This can only be accomplished through an attitude of humility, courage to unmask self-deception, fortitude to endure opposition, rejection of violence, constancy in prayer, trust in God’s faithfulness and radical reliance on His grace.

⁶ James Gilman, *Faith, Reason and Compassion*, (Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham, Maryland: 2007) p. 175