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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JEWISH AND ARAB BELIEVERS IN ISRAEL: THE CURRENT SITUATION AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARAB AND JEWISH BELIEVERS IN ISRAEL: WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT IT SHOULD BE

Introduction

The *Midrash Rabbah*, written not later than the 10th century, records a fictitious argument between Isaac and Ishmael about who was the more beloved.

This one says. "I am more beloved than you for I was circumcised in the thirteenth year." And this one says, "I am more beloved than you for I was circumcised on the eighth day." Ishmael said to him, "I am more beloved than you for I had a reason to protest [against my circumcision], but I did not protest." At that same moment, Isaac said, "I wish that God would have appeared to me and told me to cut off one of my body parts and I would not delay for a moment." Immediately [this verse appeared], "And God tested Abraham..."

The fictitious argument in *Midrash Rabbah* in many ways has come to symbolize the evergrowing divide between Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs living Israel today, both of whom are vying to become Evangelicalism's more beloved child.² This expresses itself in the form of political Christian Zionism on the one hand and Evangelical Palestinianism on the other. In most Evangelical circles, one is either a Pro-Israel enthusiast who is hostile toward the Arabs, or a Pro-Palestinian devotee who is hostile towards the Jewish state of Israel. It is our deep conviction that this ever-growing polarization among Evangelicals is not biblical, and that it has

¹ Midrash Rabbah Parashat Vayirra 55, authors' own translation

² Granted, all Christians in the Middle East, Jewish and Arab alike, believe Isaac, not Ishmael, to be of the chosen line from which God brought forth the Messiah Jesus. In terms of physical descent, however, many Arab Christians (though not all) consider themselves, like the Arab Muslims, to be physically descended from Ishmael.

been largely damaging and unproductive in terms of the fulfillment of the Great Commission among Jews and Arabs in Israel. In this paper, we would like to propose a paradigm for thinking differently about the relationship between Jewish and Arab believers, the ultimate goal of which is a rekindled passion for reaching Jews and Arabs alike, people who desperately need the gospel, and in Messiah - people who desperately need one another.³

Israel is home to 6.5 million Jews (79%), and 1.7 million Arabs (21%)⁴, and now has the largest Jewish population in the world. However, the Arab population of Israel represents a fraction of the Arabs worldwide, who number almost half a billion.⁵ Jewish-Arab relations have now hit an all-time low, a grievous reality evident in the media day after day. However, the good news is that a spiritual revival among Jews and Arabs in Israel has been taking place over the last 30 years – most of us at the BPS are mostly aware of the revival among Jewish people only.

It is worth mentioning that both Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs in Israel represent a very small, and typically marginalized, part of their larger communities. As a result, they must deal with pressures concerning identity, both as members of their respective people groups and members of the Body of Messiah. Members of the Messianic community are considered traitors by the larger Israeli Jewish community because of their faith in "that man", Yeshua the Messiah. Arab Evangelicals are also considered traitors by the traditional churches and infidels by the Muslim community. Both feel compelled to challenge their communities with the gospel, but at the same time have very strong sense of belonging to their own people,

³ It is our sincere hope that the fruit of this article will be more love for Jews and Arabs, not more love for Jews at the expense of Arabs, or more love for Arabs at the expense of the Jewish people.

⁴ Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, *Table B1: Population, by Population Group*, Aug 2014 http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications14/yarhon0814/pdf/b1.pdf>

⁵ UNESCO, *World Arabic Language Day*, Dec 18 2012 < http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/international-days/world-arabic-language-day/

despite the rejection. By coming together, Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs risk further rejection by providing "evidence" that they are traitors, fraternizing with the "enemy"! So how can positive interaction take place between Jewish and Arab believers in such a difficult environment?

Often, the dynamics between Messianic Jews and Christian Arabs are characterized by suspicion and competition. For Messianic Jews, there is celebration of our national revival in the Land of Our Fathers, and at the same time, apprehension towards, or even unawareness about, the Evangelical Arabs. Many times, military service results in an emotional block regarding Arabs. The "Arabs," after all, were our enemies when we were in the military. For Evangelical Arabs, who come from an ancient Christian tradition, the attitude is often, "Who are those Jews anyway? We are the true and faithful Christians who have been in this Land for centuries!" Interestingly enough, both communities of faith tend to think that western Christianity largely prefers the other. Sibling rivalry is not abnormal, but it usually subsides with maturity. We are getting there, hopefully.

Methodology

In the following section, we will attempt to describe some of the main attitudes Jewish and Arab believers in Messiah have towards one another in Israel. The data presented here is based on two preliminary research projects, independent from one another, each using somewhat different research methods. The first research project focuses on how Evangelical Arabs view their relationships with Messianic Jews. It was conducted by an Evangelical Arab, and a personal friend, Mr. Azar Ajaj. This research was conducted as an open-ended, semi-structural interview

⁶ Azar Ajaj, On the Road to Unity: How Evangelical Arabs in Israel View Messianic Jews. Personal Communication, 2013

with Arab Evangelical leaders in Israel. The second research projected was conducted by the authors in the fall of 2014 by means of a quantitative, internet-based questionnaire, designed specifically for this project, and sent to a representative group of Israeli Messianic leaders of varying ages. The goal of this project was to evaluate how Messianic Jews view their relationships with Evangelical Arabs. There were a total of 50 participants who answered the questions in total; 34 Evangelical Arab leaders in Mr. Ajaj's study, and 16 Messianic Jewish leaders in the study conducted by the authors (numerical data below refers only to the Messianic study). The age range in the Messianic study was 30-57, with an average of 43.5. All of the participants from both studies were male and were from various locations in Israel. While both research projects are preliminary in nature and scope, and more work (possibly together) may be needed, the data from the research provides an interesting and stimulating picture.

Results

An encouraging place to begin is that participants in both studies clearly indicated that the fellowship between Jewish and Arab followers of Messiah is extremely important, both for themselves and for the body of Messiah. Among the Messianic participants, 100 percent indicated that they are interested in deepening their fellowship with the Evangelical Arabs, of them, 75 percent indicated they are "very interested" in deepening the relationship. A significant majority (69%) of Messianic believers reported they have hosted Arab believers in their home, indicating a deeper level of relationship than merely superficial acquaintance. Evangelical Arabs also intimated similar sentiments of recognizing the importance of fellowship with Messianic Jews. On this positive note, let us look at some of the challenges in the relationship.

One major area that was identified in both studies as a hurdle for fellowship is the different views and attitudes between Evangelical Arabs and Messianic Jews regarding the Land of Israel, the State of Israel, and its role in end-time prophecies. For the Evangelical Arabs, this was a significant factor, not in terms of the belief itself, but in terms of the unbalanced emphasis it receives, in their view, within Messianic circles. Additionally, the Evangelical Arabs leaders expressed frustration that, for the Messianic Jews, anyone who does not hold to the same eschatology is "simply not teaching what the Word of God says." Further, the Evangelical Arabs feel that Messianic Jews are turning this theological stance into a *political* position, and making this the central feature of Messianic teaching in their congregations.

A cluster of questions about that topic was directed to participants in the Messianic study. One related question has been "To what degree do you emphasize in your congregation the teaching that Israel is God's chosen nation, and that the state of Israel is fulfillment of prophecy?" An overwhelming 88 percent of Messianic Jews indicated that this is so to a great degree (but no one said that this was the main teaching of their congregation). Only 12 percent indicated this teaching is marginal in their congregation. In that regard then, the Evangelical Arabs brothers' sense about the issue seems to be correct (regardless of the position one holds on the subject). Messianic leaders in Israel certainly tend to emphasize in their teaching the place of Israel nationally and prophetically, and that factor is perceived as overly emphasized and harmful to fellowship by Evangelical Arabs. Another question in that regard has been "To what degree do you think the position that Israel's place in the plan of God is emphasized as a political stance in your congregation?" Only 25 percent indicated this is so to a "great degree," while 31 percent indicated, "not at all," and 43.75 percent indicated "to a lesser degree." Clearly, there is some

⁷ Cited in Ajaj's original paper, 3

truth in the Evangelical Arabs' notion that this issue is central in Messianic theology and teaching, and even turns into a political stance. However, there seems to be a discrepancy between the views of Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs as to the centrality given to these issues in Messianic congregations. It may well be that in the *interaction* between Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs, both sides tend to take a bit of a more extreme stance than when each group is by itself. The identity tensions mentioned above may be a reason for this. Additionally, further research is needed in defining and examining more closely what exactly is meant by "turning theology to a political position".

Another related question on the topic in the Messianic study has to do with the *Messianic Jews' sense of the level in which political theology plays a part in the Evangelical Arab churches*. Fifty percent of the Messianic Jews indicated that they think this is so to a great degree, 6 percent think it is so in a "disproportionally elevated" manner, while 13 percent think it is so to a lesser degree, and 31 percent do not know. So the perception that 'theology is turning into politics" definitely seem to be a central issue in the conversation between Evangelical Arabs and Messianic Jews, and goes both ways in this complex relationship. Evangelical Arabs view Messianic Jews as politicizing theology, while Messianic Jews mirror that sense in the other direction.

Another question in that cluster in the Messianic study has been, "To what degree do you think that our fellowship as Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs is hurting because of our different Biblical understanding of Israel?" An overwhelming 82 percent indicated they think this is so to a great (or disproportionally large) degree. This further supports the centrality of the issue. An open-ended question in the Messianic study asking "What factors are hindering you from fellowshipping with Evangelical Arabs" had three themes, two of which related to this

subject: firstly the Replacement Theology held by Evangelical Arabs, secondly the political victimization as "occupied", and third, lack of time (on the side of participants to invest in the relationship).

We have also asked the Messianic participants "To what degree will you be willing to fellowship with an Arab brother that does not share your Biblical understanding regarding *Israel?*" All participants indicated they would be – 44 percent to a lesser degree, a similar percentage (44%) to a great degree, and 12 percent with no problem at all. No one said it would be prohibitive for him. So the position of Messianic Jews can be summed up as recognizing the importance of fellowship with Evangelical Arabs, even stressing a personal desire for that, while attributing the obstacles for fellowship to the attitudes held by the Evangelical Arab community leaders, yet still being willing to fellowship. Of course, as the Ajaj study demonstrates – the sentiment of the Evangelical Arabs towards Messianic Jews mirrors that sense. Social learning psychological theory calls this phenomenon – external locus of control – attributing one's results in a given field or situation to external factors, but not to himself.⁸ In our case, both Israeli Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs attribute the challenges on the road to unity to the other side's attitudes, beliefs, and actions – not to their own. Clearly there are mutual misconceptions, and despite the seriousness of the issues at hand, there is a comedic side to the dynamics. The Messianic study further asked "Which 'side' in your opinion carries heavier responsibility for the challenges in fellowship between Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs?" The distribution of answers among the Messianic Jewish respondents further seems to support this external locus of control: 56 percent answered Evangelical Arabs (as carrying the heavier responsibility), 31 percent answered "equally", 6 percent indicated that international Christians

⁸ Julian Rotter, 1966

carry the responsibility, and only 7 percent indicated that Messianic Jews carry heavier responsibility for the situation.

Another obstacle to true fellowship mentioned by the Arab brothers is that Messianic Jews overly emphasize their "Jewishness" in ways such as celebrating the Jewish feasts and refusing to designate themselves as "Christians". Evangelical Arabs view this as a "separatist", "prideful" or "elitist" attitude, causing Messianic Jews to look down on their Arab brothers (and other gentile believers). Some Evangelical Arabs went as far as calling the Messianic Jewish attitude in this matter "racist."

A relevant question in the Messianic study has been, "Which do you think is more important: our identification with our people, Israel, or the global Body of Messiah (including Evangelical Arabs)?" It is worth mentioning once again that as a community that exists on the fringes of both the Jewish and the Christian worlds, 9 Jewish identity is a major issue in Messianic circles, with various expressions and opinions. It is interesting then, that in this survey among Israeli Messianic Jews 53 percent answered "equally" (that is identifying equally with Israel and the global Church), 40 percent answered "the global church," and only 7 percent indicated "the Jewish people." While more research is definitely needed in this matter, this preliminary data seems to contradict the Evangelical Arabs' notion – only 7 percent expressed views considered to be separatist. For Israeli Messianic Jews –belonging to the global Church is important!

Another point raised by the Evangelical Arabs is the slanted support of the international evangelical community in favor of Messianic Jews while marginalizing (sometimes unknowingly) the Evangelical Arab community in Israel. This is related to both ideological *and*

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⁹ Nerel, 1996

financial support. A question on that topic in the Messianic study has been "Do you think Evangelicals from abroad are more supportive of Messianic Jews or Evangelical Arabs?" Fifty percent said it was equal between Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs, 44 percent indicated that Messianic Jews are more supported, and 6 percent indicated that Evangelical Arabs are more supported. In general then, the Messianic study seems to support the notion that the Evangelical Arabs are indeed marginalized by the Global Evangelical community in comparison with the Messianic Jewish community in Israel, but to a lesser degree than appeared to be the case in Ajaj's study. We must remember that the questions about support had to do with perception. Further research, looking at more concrete factors of worldwide evangelical support is needed. These factors include participation in international Evangelical forums, conferences, committees, and funding agencies, and so on, in order to provide a better answer that is based on facts.

Additional questions in the Messianic study that did not have a direct counterpart in the Ajaj study concerned the way in which Messianic Jews perceive the status of Evangelical Arabs in the state of Israel, as well as questions about their personal experience in various existing reconciliation forums. All of the respondents in the Messianic study were aware of the existence of forums that attempt to bring together Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs (25% to a lesser degree, 75% to a great degree or very much). The great majority of respondents spoke from personal experience of having attended such forums (only 13% indicated they have not). Fifty percent had participated in such forums 1-10 times, 6 percent 11-20 times, and 31 percent more than 20 times. Those that had participated in these reconciliation forums were asked "How would you rate your experience?" Interestingly, 29 percent indicated their experience had been "positive", 43 percent indicated it was "neutral", and 44 percent indicated it was "negative". As both Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs clearly state that they recognize the importance and

have a desire for joint meetings, it is curious that less than one third of participants indicated their experience had been positive. Further research is needed to identify the factors that are contributing to positive or negative experiences of these meetings, in order to make them more effective.

Finally, two questions were asked about the Messianic participants' perception of, and familiarity with, the unique challenges that Evangelical Arabs face in Israel. The first question was; "To what degree do you think the state of Israel (regardless of faith in Messiah) discriminates against its Arab citizens?" Twelve percent of participants "had no idea", only 6 percent answered "not at all", while 82 percent of Messianic respondents indicated they think there is discrimination in Israel towards Arab citizens (44% to a lesser degree, 38% to a greater degree). In the Ajaj study, Evangelical Arab leaders emphasized the unique challenges they face. They referred to their situation as being, "a minority within a minority", since Arabs are an ethnic minority in the state of Israel (21% of the population, just over 1.6 million), Christians are a tiny minority among the majority Muslim Arab community (just under 129,000, approximately 2% ¹⁰) and an even smaller minority of those Christians are Evangelicals (the larger Christian community being nominally Catholic, Orthodox, and so forth). The number of Evangelical Arabs in Israel is estimated to be between 3000 and 5000; approximately 3 percent of all Israel's Arab Christians. 11 Participants were also asked "To what degree are you aware of the unique challenges Evangelical Arabs go through in Israel because of their faith?" Nineteen percent were not aware of this at all, while 25 percent reported being aware to a lesser degree,

¹⁰ Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, *Table B1: Population, by Population Group*, Aug 2014 http://www.cbs.gov.il/publications14/yarhon0814/pdf/b1.pdf

¹¹ Whilst there is agreement that there are at least 3000 Evangelical Arabs in Israel, the numbers vary depending on who is included, for example, children, Muslim or Druze background believers, only those in Evangelical churches or including others who worship elsewhere, and so on. The highest number seemed to be 5000.

and 56 percent to a greater degree (no one "very much"). We can sum up by saying that Messianic Jews possess only partial awareness of the unique challenges faced by Evangelical Arabs. It would be interesting to learn of the awareness of Evangelical Arabs about the unique challenges that Messianic Jews face (in Israel and the world-wide Jewish community). More education, and hopefully mutual encouragement and help are definitely needed!

The results are summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Summary of questions in the Messianic Jews Study (Percentages):

_		0	1-10	11-20	20+
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1.	How many Arab Evangelicals do you	0	19	50	31
_	know personally?	13	50	(21
2.	How many times have you participated in forums attempting to bring together	13	50	6	31
	Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs?				
		Yes	No	No, but I visited	
3.	Have you ever hosted an Evangelical Arab in your home?	69	25	6	
		MJs	Ev. Ar.	Equally	Int'l Christians
4.	Do you think Evangelicals from abroad are more supportive of Messianic Jews or Evangelical Arabs?	44	6	50	n/a
5.	Which "side" in your opinion carries heavier responsibility for the challenges in fellowship between Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs?	7	56	31	6
	C	MJs	Global Church	Equally	
6.	Which do you think is more important: our identification with our people Israel or the global Body of Messiah (including Evangelical Arabs)?	44%	6%	50%	
		Not at all	To a Lesser Degree	To a Great Degree	Our main teaching
7.	To what degree do you emphasize in your congregation the teaching that Israel is God's chosen nation, and that the state of Israel is fulfillment of prophecy?	6	6	88	0

	Not at all	To a Lesser Degree	To a Great Degree	No Problem!
8. To what degree will you be willing to fellowship with an Arab brother that does not share your Biblical understanding regarding Israel?	0	44	44	12
	Not at all	To a Lesser Degree	To a Great Degree	Dispropo rtionally so
9. To what degree do you think the position that Israel's place in the plan of God is emphasized as a political stance in your congregation?	31	44	25	0
10. To what degree do you think the position that Evangelical Arabs hold regarding Israel's place in the plan of God is emphasized as a political stance in their congregations?	0	13	50	6
11. To what degree do you think that our fellowship as Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs is hurting because of our different Biblical understanding of Israel?	6	6	75	13
	Not at all	To a Lesser Degree	To a Great Degree	Very Much
12. To what degree are you familiar with the culture and history of Evangelical Arabs in Israel?	6	75	19	
13. To what degree would you personally be interested to deepen your fellowship with Evangelical Arabs?	0	25	44	31
14. How important, in your opinion, is the topic of fellowship between Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs?	0	6	56	38
15. To what degree are you aware of the unique challenges Evangelical Arabs go through in Israel because of their faith?	19	25	56	0
16. To what degree are you aware of orgs attempting to bring Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs in Israel?	0	25	56	19
	Not at all	To a Lesser Degree	To a Great Degree	No Idea
17. To what degree do you think the state of Israel (regardless of faith in Messiah) discriminates against its Arab citizens?	6	44	38	12

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	
18. If you have personally taken part in meetings of Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs, how would you rate your experience?	29	43	28	
	Joint Prayer	Joint Evangeli sm	Joint Youth Conf.	Leaders' discussing differences
19. Which of the following activities between Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs is most important (choose 2): (NOTE: total greater than 100%)	51	31	31	44

Discussion

We began this paper with a fictitious debate between Isaac and Ishmael about who was the more beloved of Abraham's sons, metaphorically representing Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs. Sadly, this argument continues unabated in the Evangelical world, the fruit of which is always a diminished love for Arabs on the one hand, or Jews on the other. This diminished love, and at times, antipathy, for Jews or Arabs among Evangelicals, adds fuel to the already raging fire. Although a spiritual awakening of sorts is taking place in Israel among both Jewish and Arabic people, the tension between the two groups (largely stemming from the burden each community has for their own people, along with language and cultural barriers) endangers unity in the Body of Messiah in Israel. The challenge ahead is finding the courage to celebrate our differences in a way that honors the Lord, and one another; to stand together before a watching global Evangelical community and world – and truly live in unity in Messiah.

We would like to propose that in the current Middle East and in the state of Israel,

Jewish and Arab believers in Jesus *need* one another. Ministry to the Jews and Arabs in Israel is

at its best when we raise a united, coordinated voice. God's blessing flows in abundance when

we are able to stand together, Jews and Arabs, one in Messiah. There are at least three reasons why Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs need one another:

A Theological Reason

Both the Evangelical Arab and Messianic Jewish communities operate at the periphery of Israeli society, as those who have identified themselves as followers of Jesus the Messiah. Strong feelings of belonging to each of our heritages, coupled with a desire to share the gospel with our own peoples, tend to result in a separate, politically-oriented theology. The Middle East has become more polarized than ever in recent history. The city of Jerusalem represents a huge, insurmountable divide. Religious feelings and emotions have skyrocketed. Both communities are making great efforts to recruit world media, and Evangelicalism, to their respective sides. Evangelicals – scholars, clergy, and laymen alike – devote much time, energy, and emotion portraying the situation and grievances experienced by one side or the other. This attempt to capture the allegiance of the Evangelical community has resulted in a distinctly non-Evangelical approach that spends far more time *delegitimizing* the other side, and little or no time fostering a passion among Evangelicals to evangelize Jews and Arabs for whose sake God's Son shed his blood. In spite of this growing divide, God has been working among a growing minority of Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs who worship Him *together*, and who recognize their redemptive-historical interdependency. The unique fellowship provides a desperately needed theological realignment for Jewish and Arab believers, who have a tendency to focus more on political, rather than theological, solutions to the conflict. Jewish and Arab believers need each other in order to stay focused on our main task: to bring the good news of Yeshua to all of Abraham's children, and to the world.

A Missiological Reason

Unity in Messiah among Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs has a weighty missiological effect upon a war-torn land. There is something very special and "not of this world" when an Arab speaks to a Jewish person about the love of God in the Messiah Yeshua, and vice versa. There are stories of Jewish Israelis who have come to faith through Evangelical Arabs, and likewise, stories of Arabs who have discovered the unconditional love of God through the witness of a Jewish follower of Yeshua. Sadly, the recent Evangelical preoccupation with politics over evangelization has not only created a growing divide among Evangelicals *outside* of Israel, but also among Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs within Israel. With this divide comes a stunted witness of the supernatural love that has the power to bring us together again into Abraham's family. Jewish and Arab followers of Yeshua 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.

A Doxological Reason

When Jewish and Arab believers in the Messiah worship God together while at the same time respecting each other's heritage and traditions, each community learns more about God one from the other. Jewish believers do not have well-established Christian traditions, while many times Christian Arabs have very rich and meaningful Christian traditions. Christmas is one example of a very rich Christian tradition that is typically lacking in the Israeli Messianic Jewish experience. As we all know, most Messianic Jews are rather suspicious of Christmas. Jewish believers, in their desire to express the Jewishness of their faith, typically distance themselves from

Christmas, thereby ignoring the most significant birth in human history. Many Jewish believers in Israel, however, have rediscovered the wonder of the birth of the greatest Jew in history by celebrating Christmas with Arab Christians. Similarly, the celebration of Passover with Jewish believers has also resulted in a significantly deepened appreciation for Messiah's death and resurrection in the Arab Evangelical community. Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs need one another to enjoy a fuller experience of the greatness of our God as expressed in our various faith traditions.

Conclusion

As Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs, we challenge one another to stay theologically focused on the good news of Messiah Yeshua and the Great Commission. We complement one another missiologically, each community able to testify to the other about the love of God in a manner that goes way beyond one's ethnocentric love for his or her own people group. We enrich one another doxologically, mutually experiencing God's gracious provision of a Savior in a manner that goes beyond our respective faith traditions. And because Yeshua, not Jews or Arabs, is truly God's most beloved Son, Messianic Jews and Evangelical Arabs can and should live together as the one new man by finding their identities in God's most Beloved Son.

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