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MISHKAN

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"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us,
and we beheld His glory,
glory as of the only begotten from the Father,
full of grace and truth."

A “Messianic Jewish Church” in Eretz-Israel?

Gershon Nerel

After *Operation Mercy* in May 1948,¹ a fresh starting point was possible for Jewish believers in Yeshua (JBY) in the new State of Israel. However, this beginning was neither easy nor simple. Demographically, militarily and economically, the young state still had to struggle for its very survival. Also those few JBY, about three dozen, who did remain in the Land and were scattered in the central cities like Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv-Jaffa and Haifa, were just trying to survive.² JBY were a tiny group in the Land, and as there were those among them who insisted on keeping their faith secret,³ only few visionaries within their circles could think about forming a distinctive infrastructure for an indigenous body of JBY.⁴

Between Two Options: Expatriate Orientation and Indigenization

The newcomers among the multitudes of *Olim* (new immigrants) that poured into the Land in the early 1950's eagerly looked for ways of associating themselves with other individual Hebrew Christians and families. Particularly they sought to join fellowships and congregations of their brethren. However, local independent Messianic Jewish communities did not exist, except for two small assemblies —

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¹ See Gershon Nerel, "Attempts to Establish a 'Messianic Jewish Church' in Eretz-Israel," in *Mishkan*, 28/1998, pp. 34-44.

² See Gershon Nerel, "Rachel Bar-David: Mother of a Modern Israeli Messianic Jewish Tribe," in *The Messianic Jew and Hebrew Christian*, vol. 67, 3, 1994, pp. 66-70.

³ See Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem*, Autobiographical Sketches, Jerusalem 1977, p. 101. [unpublished ms.] Ben-Meir also used the pseudonyms *Moshe Tal* and *Moshe Hayerushalmi*.

⁴ Paul Re'em, "Challenge and Response," in *The Hebrew Christian*, vol. 34, 1962, pp. 91-95. See also Gershon Nerel, "Solomon Ostrovsky: A Pioneer and 'Watchman' in Eretz-Israel," in *The Messianic Jew and Hebrew Christian*, vol. 69, 1, 1996, pp. 5-8.

one in Jerusalem⁵ and the other in Haifa.⁶ On the other hand, the various western churches that already labored in the Land still offered an open door as an optional framework to these new immigrants. Among these denominations we should mention especially the major missionary organizations: the British Anglican "Church Mission to Jews" (CMJ),⁷ the American Pentecostal "Christian and Missionary Alliance" (C&MA),⁸ and the Lutherans, namely the Finnish "Evangelical Mission" (SLS)⁹ and the Norwegian "Israel's Mission."¹⁰

In the early 1950's the expatriate missions were attempting to resume their functions in the Land to full capacity. Most of their staff were evacuated before the heavy atrocities began and later, when the situation calmed down, the missionaries renewed their work among the Jews. In principle, these missionaries wanted to reestablish in Israel the traditional mixed congregations, comprised of a gentile majority and a Jewish minority, under their denominational wings, as they did in Mandatory Palestine. They continued to do their best to attract JBY among the new immigrants and bring their gradual assimilation into their circles.

In light of this situation, Moshe Ben-Meir, for example, one of the central personalities among Israeli Messianic Jews, sharply criticized the churches and the missionaries in the Land and called them "Christian Babylon." Ben-Meir even considered the traditional missionaries his "enemies" and painfully wrote about them, "Here, in Israel, we have men and women who are useless, have no vision, and have come to convert Jews to their particular branch of Christianity and sabotage all efforts of Messianic Jews to unite and be effective in their witness and ministry."¹¹

Thus, much more than in Mandatory Palestine, JBY in Israel had to struggle for their unique emancipation vis-à-vis the influential historical churches that

⁵ Pauline Rose, "Letters From Jerusalem," in *Jerusalem*, Organ of the Jewish Christian Community and the Jerusalem Fellowship, no. 25, October 1948, pp. 3- 5, and idem, "Letters From Jerusalem," *ibid.*, no. 26, November 1948, pp. 9-11.

⁶ Abram Poljak, "Letters from Mt. Carmel," in *Jerusalem*, no. 20, May 1948, pp. 4-5; Pauline Rose, "The Lights of Haifa," *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁷ Roger G. Allison, "Marriage and Other Matters," in *Jewish Missionary News*, vol. 41, issue 10, December 1951-January 1952, pp. 146-147. See also idem, "Summer in the Settlements," *ibid.*, vol. 41, issue 21, Oct.-Nov. 1953, pp. 331-332 .

⁸ *Sixty-Fifth Year Annual Report for 1951 and Minutes of the General Council*, held at Atlanta, Georgia, May 1952, The Christian and Missionary Alliance, pp. 125- 127. Cf. *Annual Report for 1953, Sixty-Seventh Year*, *op.cit.*, pp.128-130.

⁹ See Raakel Luomanen, *Portinvartijan majasta (Iloa ja arkea Israelissa 1953- 1989)*, Suomen Lähetysseura, Pieksämäki 1991.

¹⁰ Laszlo G. Terray & Øystein Østenstand, *Den Norske Israelmisjons Historie II (1944-1969)*, Nomi Forlag, Oslo n.d. (?1970), esp. pp. 141-154.

¹¹ Moshe I. Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem*, pp. 47-50.

were increasingly functioning in the Land. As Israeli citizens who aimed at expressing their Jewish identity, JBY needed to choose their way. Practically, the issues under consideration were as follows: Should they join the ecclesiastical congregations of the expatriate gentile churches, or should they establish free congregations of their own? Should they shape their theology and liturgy exclusively in Hebrew? How could they achieve legal status and a social recognition for their unique congregations and organizations?

These issues were dealt with through the continuous attempts of individual JBY to collectively shape their own patterns of grouping as well as genuinely define their beliefs and style the forms of their worship. Basically the trend that they followed was towards indigenization, namely to develop and maintain their theological and organizational independence apart from the traditional churches. Yet on the personal level they still kept close contacts with the representatives of the expatriate ecclesiastical organizations in Israel.

The "Jerusalem Jewish Christian Fellowship"

A handful of the "Jerusalem Fellowship" remained in the city during the siege and the war of 1948 under the leadership of Pauline Rose. They were most proud that they could continue to hold their services regularly in spite of the battles going on, yet they faced other problems. Several of the members of the community were arrested and interrogated by the Stern Group (*Lohamei Heruth Israel*). The whole Jewish Christian community was accused of spying under a religious cloak. Eventually they were discharged,¹² but the congregation suffered a serious split.

Those who were released from prison, among them Baruch Karniel, introduced "The New Community," adopting a liberal doctrinal tendency that refused to accept the accuracy of the Bible. Thus, for example, they also rejected the doctrine concerning Messiah's return.¹³ In response to this development, Abram Poljak, their superior leader who then lived on Mount Carmel in Haifa, strongly attacked these "separatists." He named them "intoxicated souls" and blamed them for doing away with everything that would be a reminder of the Church, especially the image of the cross.

Poljak disapproved of the ex-prisoners' attempt to remove the official flag of the community, comprised of a blue cloth as background and a white cross in

¹² Pauline Rose, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, Patmos, London 1949, pp. 74-85. As for the later inclination of Rose towards an ecumenical approach of a liberal "Brotherhood of Goodwill," see Pauline Rose, *Window on Mount Zion*, W.H. Allen, London and New York, 1973, pp. 64-66.

¹³ Abram Poljak, "Purity of the Teaching," in *Jerusalem*, no. 29, February 1949, p. 5.

the star of David that became their representative banner.¹⁴ This flag, as an eye-catching symbol of their faith, regularly hung on the wall of their meeting room located in the center of the New City of Jerusalem.¹⁵

Furthermore, Poljak also attacked this dissident faction of the original community for deciding to speak only of the "Messiah Jesus," and thus ignoring and pushing into the background the "divine Sonship" of Yeshua. Consequently Poljak also expressed his dissatisfaction that they "no longer addressed their prayers to Yeshua but merely to God." In other words, for Poljak "The New Community" lost the significant theological balance between Jewish nationalism and spiritual faith. He phrased this as follows: "Satan wants us to think so much and so long of our national king Jesus, until we forget the Lamb of God."¹⁶ Therefore the concrete Cross of Calvary, in the eyes of Poljak, had to retain its visibility in the congregation with no compromise.

However, in retrospect we observe a continuous consensus within Messianic Jewish circles to refrain from the public manifestation of a tangible cross. Currently there is a common view among Messianic Jews that such an act is too sensitive and too provocative for normative Jewish society because historically the cross also became a symbol for antisemites. This is continually remembered in Israel, the Land where the Crusaders held both cross and sword in their hands. Thus out of consideration for the feelings of their neighbors, Messianic Jews no longer exhibit the physical symbol of the cross in their congregation. This became a non-issue for them.

In this respect we also need to add and clarify that Messianic Jews do not disregard the significant message of the cross in the congregational teaching. The themes of the crucified Messiah, his atoning blood and the humiliation of the way of the cross are central components in their hermeneutics. At the same time, however, we should also note that unlike the Messianic Jews, Hebrew Catholics in Israel, as elsewhere, still use the symbol of the cross in their worship places, at their homes or as a personal ornament.

Another teaching that Poljak denounced in the "Jerusalem Community" was their approach to the Apostle Paul. This attitude, which Poljak defined as "For Yeshua – Against Paul," was regarded by him as a "semi-Christian" idea. In fact, Poljak claimed that the community tried to follow the worldly footsteps of Israeli leading thinkers like the professors Martin Buber and Joseph Klausner of the Jerusalem Hebrew University. Namely, Poljak believed that it was a

¹⁴ Since 1959 another emblem of the "Jerusalem Community" was a wooden candelabrum, with a cross inside the Star of David that was placed between the seven-branches.

¹⁵ Abram Poljak, "The Fall. Letters From Mount Carmel," in *Jerusalem* no. 28, January 1949, p. 4.

¹⁶ Abram Poljak, "The Cross Matters," in *Jerusalem* no. 28, January 1949, p. 5.

mistake to follow those who proclaimed that Jews should accept Yeshua as the "central Jewish figure," but should reject Paul.¹⁷

In other words, Poljak stressed that the congregation should be taught the "correct exegesis" that there is no real Yeshua without Paul, and that only through Paul was the highest revelation of the person and meaning of Yeshua given. Thus the functions of the community, according to Poljak, had to be as follows: 1) a pure childlike faith in Yeshua the King of the Jews and the personal Redeemer, and 2) loyalty to the Jewish people – without concessions to mere trends of the time or nationalistic tendencies.¹⁸

The crisis in the "Jerusalem Fellowship" was solved by exclusions and by making admissions more difficult. As a matter of principle, the leadership under Poljak consented that their task to serve as "watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem" could be carried out by only few, a nucleus specially gifted and trained. Practically, the community did not focus on attempting to find those few. They had to come by themselves, led by God. However, even the few did not come. In fact after Poljak left for Germany in the mid-1950's and died in Möttlingen in 1963, other leaders also left the congregation.

Pauline Rose stopped expressing publicly her faith in Yeshua, joined other Jewish circles and finally also left the congregation. In 1965 she started a "Brotherhood of Goodwill" for Jews, Arabs and Christians on Mount Zion.¹⁹ Albert von Springer, another salient leader of the group, also left the congregation and settled in Switzerland. The Fellowship "naturally dissolved" as it had no second generation or other new members.²⁰ Thus towards the early 1970's the "Jerusalem Fellowship" drastically shrank and simply disappeared.²¹ In summary we should remark that the community members hardly spoke Hebrew. Their Friday and Sabbath liturgies, the highlight of their worship, as well as their prayers, were usually carried out in German or English.

¹⁷ Abram Poljak, "The Cross Matters."

¹⁸ Abram Poljak, "The Cross Matters". As for Poljak's deep appreciation for Paul see also Abram Poljak, "Paul the Jew – And Jewry," in *Jerusalem*, no. 18, March 1948, pp. 4-7.

¹⁹ Pauline Rose, *Window on Mount Zion*, esp. pp. 140-141.

²⁰ Abram Poljak and Pauline Rose had no children. Albert von Springer remarried and his children who still live today in Israel did not adopt the faith of their father in Yeshua. As a matter of fact, the "Jerusalem Community" paid no attention at all to the issue of gradually raising a young generation and so passing on the faith in Yeshua from within their circles. An exception is the Haimoff (Bar David) family, in which all seven children remained committed JBY.

²¹ Today *Jerusalem*, the periodical organ of this group, still continues to be printed in England. However, all the published material is from reprinted articles of 40 and 50 years ago.

The "Union of Messianic Jews in Israel"

The idea of forming a "Union of Messianic Jews in Israel" (*Ichud Yehudim Meshi'im BeIsrael*) was crystallized within a steering committee of eight Messianic Jews that gathered for a preliminary meeting in November 1950. The participants were: Moshe Ben-Meir, Martha Baruch, Israel Weber, David Salpeter, Ze'ev Kofsmán, Abram Poljak, Menachem Remer and Shmuel Hermann. Their meeting took place in the "Church of the Scandinavian Seamen," led by the Norwegian pastor Per Faye Hansen, on 41 Meir Street in Haifa. Their vision was to revive the "Hebrew Christian Alliance of Palestine" that ended its career shortly before the State of Israel was declared.

Moshe Ben-Meir, in his opening speech, said:

*Here in Eretz-Israel we live within a heavier spiritual war than one finds in the Jewish Dispersion. The forces of Satan and the world of demons work here harder and more diligently than in any other place. Satanic forces are fighting especially against us, the Messianic Jews, the remnant of Israel today. Following the establishment of the State, our spiritual responsibility has doubled and tripled.*²²

The purpose of the participants was to unite the Messianic Jews in Israel and to provide encouragement and a guiding hand to the brethren among the new immigrants.

The founding members of the Union were aware of the fact that there was no doctrinal unity among JBY in the Land. One of the main topics that caused many disagreements was whether to observe Saturday or Sunday for worship. Ben-Meir, for example, claimed that the question of observing the Sabbath, especially in the State of Israel, became a non-issue. "Here in this land," he said, "it is natural for Jews to keep the Sabbath. This is now a Law of the State to keep the seventh day and so we do."²³

Eventually during the Feast of Hanukkah, December 8-9, 1950, the first general conference of Messianic Jews in the State of Israel solemnly gathered together. In the notes of Moshe Ben-Meir it was mentioned that to the convocation, that met at the YMCA auditorium in Jerusalem, came about 200 Jewish Jesus believers.²⁴ A few non-Jewish believers were also present there, representing mainly the Anglicans and the Lutherans. The Israeli Hebrew press showed a special interest in this event.²⁵

²² A Hebrew Draft of "Report of Meeting of Representatives of Messianic Jews in Israel", held in Haifa on November 1, 1950. Unpublished manuscript.

²³ "Report of Meeting of representatives of Messianic Jews in Israel," *ibid*.

²⁴ Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem*, p. 115. However, among the personal papers of Ze'ev Kofsmán dealing with the same issue it is mentioned that there were about 60 participants only.

²⁵ An extensive report appeared in the daily *Yedioth Chadashot* of 21 December 1950:

A committee of 13 was elected, seven for Jerusalem, three for Jaffa-Tel-Aviv and three for Haifa, and charged with the building up of the Union, the drafting of its constitution and its representation to the government. They naively thought that they would easily get an official recognition by the Ministry of Religions. Rabbi Daniel Zion, ex-chief rabbi in Sofia, Bulgaria, was elected as the President. As the committee of the Union was democratically elected, its members believed that they were the only body that had the right to speak, locally and internationally, in the name of all JBY in Israel.

This "monopolistic representative approach," one sees in retrospect, caused many disputes and in fact repeated itself in the coming years with other attempts to create similar bodies. This centralistic approach prevented the establishment of an enduring national institution of JBY in Israel. Still, through the Union, Abram Poljak and Ben-Meir, two of the leading persons at the convention, moved toward establishing a Messianic Synagogue in Israel.

In this convention Messianic Jews declared that they believe in Yeshua the Messiah as their promised Savior, accept both the Old and New Testaments, but do not believe in all the doctrines which the gentile churches have evolved. Specifically, "their understanding of the person and teaching of the Messiah is purely Jewish."²⁶ This radical theological statement caused much speculation and we shall deal with this issue further on. At the conference, however, JBY also expressed their great need for an independent organization in Israel and that jointly they were committed to a living witness for Yeshua in Israel.²⁷

Outside of Israel it was also reported that "Ex-Chief Rabbi becomes Bishop" and that "the elected first Bishop of the Hebrew Christian Church and the Congress called on the Government to recognize the church as a religious community within the Jewish nation." Interestingly, while JBY felt a need to immediately correct the report that they had a "Bishop," they made no attempts whatsoever to deny that they did establish a national church.²⁸

The request to the authorities for recognition as a "Synagogal Unit" within Jewry was turned down. This rejection, following their high expectations for State recognition, caused strong feelings of disappointment which quickly led to the disintegration of the Union. Another reason offered for the fast breakdown is

"Ninety persons took part in the convention, among them 10 non-Jews. However voting at the convention was restricted to Jews only. The Shabbat evening service closed with the singing of 'Hatikvah' (Israel's national anthem) to which was added a verse proclaiming Jesus as the King of the Jews."

²⁶ "Convention of Messianic Jews," in *Jerusalem*, no. 53, February 1951, pp. 6-7.

²⁷ Agnes Waldstein, "The Jerusalem Conference of Messianic Jews," in *Jerusalem*, no. 54, March 1951, pp. 2-4.

²⁸ "Conference in Jerusalem," in *Jerusalem*, no. 54, March 1951, pp. 4-5. See also "Association of Messianic Believers in Israel," in *Jerusalem*, no. 59, August 1951, pp. 7-8.

that the Jerusalemite JBY decided to dissolve the Union as they were totally under the influence of the missionary organizations. Ben Meir wrote: "the Missions are not interested in a Union of Messianic Jews which would be independent of them. In their interests it is more convenient when Messianic Jews are divided."²⁹

Finally the 'Union' disbanded after only several months of activity. The President, Daniel Zion, found it impossible to continue and function without having a legal and recognized status in Israel. In addition to that, most of the members of the elected committee decided to resign. Unity was not achieved among them.

The "Messianic Jewish Alliance of Israel"

A second national convention of Messianic Jews in the State of Israel was organized in January 1954 by Max Enker, the Secretary for Israel of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance (IHCA).³⁰ About 100 JBY met again at the YMCA auditorium in Jerusalem and a constitution was prepared for the "Jewish Christian Alliance of Israel" (*Die Judenchristliche Allianz in Israel*). The constitution was written in German as Enker and his friends did not speak Hebrew. Dr. Otto F. Cahn, from the Scottish Church in Jaffa, was elected President, Rev. Jakob Blum from Jerusalem was the Vice President and Max Enker served as the Secretary.³¹ Also within these circles the Hebrew language was usually absent.

Moshe Ben-Meir, Abram Poljak, Daniel Zion and others who initiated the formation of the Union in 1950 were not involved in this new Alliance. In fact Ben-Meir sharply criticized it, as follows:

*The SECOND convocation was called by a Committee of 'Missionary' Messianic Jews, that is, by people who are in the employ of Missions. This conference did not permit the attendance of Gentile brethren, excluded unbaptized believers from membership, and emphasized its Protestantism by excluding Messianic Jews of the Roman Catholic persuasion.*³²

²⁹ Moshe Ben-Meir, *From Jerusalem to Jerusalem*, p. 118.

³⁰ Max Enker came to Israel from Holland in 1952. He replaced the Norwegian Missionary Magne Solheim who represented in Israel the International Hebrew Christian Alliance. Enker never became an Israeli citizen and left the country in 1958.

³¹ Heinz David Leuner, "Judenchristliche Allianz in Israel," in *Der Zeuge*, Organ der Internationalen Judenchristlichen Allianz, no. 12, June 1954, p. 3. According to this source there were 200 participants. Moshe Ben-Meir, however, wrote in his notes that there were only about 100 JBY. The IHCA reported that there were 140 Hebrew Christians "within our Alliance in Israel." See Harcourt Samuel, "News and Notes," in *The Hebrew Christian*, vol. 28, #1, 1955, p. 4. Shlomo Ze'ev Kofsman mentioned that there were only 80 JBY.

³² Moshe Ben-Meir (signed as 'Sabra'), *Toward the Messianic Church in Israel*, n.d. (?1955), unpublished manuscript.

Thus Ben-Meir also attacked the IHCA for coming from abroad and "imposing" on the locals a branch of its own institution and thus having direct control over Israeli believers.

Strategically, the Alliance leaders intended to establish a "Messianic Church" in Israel. Again, however, the term *church* was not used, especially in Hebrew, because it was felt that emotionally and historically they could not use such a heavily loaded gentile term. "Alliance" could convey a more neutral meaning. Anyhow, the Alliance had three small centers: in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. Its constitution specified that theologically and practically the single authoritative guideline for members of the Alliance is Scripture, both Old and New Testaments.³³

As a matter of fact, the "Max Enker Alliance" in Israel was indeed the 'baby' of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance. In 1950, for example, the leadership of the IHCA had already reached the following resolution:

*The Executive of the IHCA regards the establishment of an indigenous Church of Christ in the State of Israel as the goal to be pursued both by the Alliance and the missionary societies — believing that such a Church can best present the Gospel to the people of Israel and shepherd believers in Christ, and it pledges its support to all who pursue this aim.*³⁴

Consequently, the inclusive doctrinal basis of the IHCA also served as the theological framework for the Israeli Alliance. This included, for example, public confession of faith in the deity and resurrection of Yeshua, and belief in the vicarious suffering of Yeshua on the Cross of Golgotha.³⁵

The clear task of this Association in Israel was grasped by the officers of the IHCA in England as follows:

*To foster the life of the newly formed Israeli Alliance, to strengthen its fellowship and witness, till it becomes, under God, an effective influence for Christ within the Nation; To work out and propagate, both in Israel and among Hebrew Christians generally, a truly Biblical Zionism. To do this is probably more important than to plan for a Hebrew Christian Church, which will almost certainly come into existence by itself. Such a Biblical Zionism rightly understood can contribute much to the shaping of an indigenous church in Israel.*³⁶

³³ "Charakter der Organization," # 2. in: *Verfassung und Regeln der Judenchristlichen Allianz in Israel* Private archives of 'Schwester Ida.'

³⁴ Harry L. Ellison, Nahum Levison, Harcourt Samuel, "Report on Israel," in *The Hebrew Christian*, vol. 23. 1950. p. 75.

³⁵ See Gershon Nerel, *Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel (1917-1967): Trend and Changes in Shaping Self Identity*. Ph.D. Dissertation. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1996. pp. 149-151. [Hebrew, unpublished].

³⁶ "Minutes of the Ninth International Conference of the IHCA, Held at Chicago. 20- 22 September 1955." in *The Hebrew Christian*, vol. 28. 1955. p. 109. We should also mention that the IHCA handled a special fund named "Abraham's Vineyard Ltd." that held a designated sum of £4,590 for the erection of a Hebrew Christian Church in Israel. In this

We should note that Per Østerbye, in his book *The Church in Israel*, wrongly concluded that “in opposition to the policy of the IHCA, the Hebrew Christian Alliance in Israel has attempted to form a Hebrew Christian Church.”³⁷ This definitely was not in contrast with the policy of the IHCA. Although the IHCA did decide in principle that it was not in favor of forming a Hebrew Christian Church,³⁸ it made an exception with regard to Israel. In the State of Israel the IHCA had deliberately chosen to establish a Church for JBY.³⁹ Furthermore, “Biblical Zionism” for the IHCA was *not categorically* “more important than planning a Hebrew Christian Church,” as Østerbye only partly quotes from the documents. “Biblical Zionism,” unlike the mistaken interpretation of Østerbye, was not merely a substitute for a Messianic Jewish Church. In those years, in fact “Biblical Zionism” was rather grasped as a most instrumental tool towards creating a national church in Israel.

However, in 1958 Max Enker returned to Holland with his family and the “Israeli Alliance” disintegrated. No common ground was established between the Jewish and gentile believers and particularly many disputes arose between the Jewish believers themselves. According to Enker there were in Israel too many Messianic Jewish “sects.”⁴⁰

“The Israeli Messianic Assembly — Jerusalem Congregation”

Unlike the “Union,” the “Alliance” and the “Fellowship” that formerly dissolved and disappeared, the “Israeli Messianic Assembly – Jerusalem Congregation” (*Kehila Meshīhit Israelit – Kehilat Yerushalayim*) still functions today. The initiator of the *Kehila* was Shlomo Ze’ev Kofsman, who nurtured a deep vision for developing an indigenous Israeli congregation. The other founders who joined him were: Eva (Hava) Kronhaus, Rina Preiss, Yvette Kofsman (Shlomo’s wife), Izidor Wolf, Avraham Fried, Avraham Zuhokowitch, Rachel Greenberg, Ruth Appel and Shmuel Ekroth.

In January 1957 Kofsman sent an official letter to the Governor of Jerusalem in the Ministry of Interior Affairs, requesting to formally register the Messianic

connection there was negotiation for a suitable site. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁷ Per Østerbye. *The Church in Israel*. Gleerup, Lund. Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia no. xv. Denmark 1970, p. 170.

³⁸ Harcourt Samuel. “The History of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance,” in *Mishkan*, 14/1991, p. 79.

³⁹ “Minutes of the Eighth International Conference of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance Held at Woudschoten, Holland 18-20 July 1950,” in *The Hebrew Christian*, vol. 23, 1950, p. 67.

⁴⁰ Per Østerbye. *The Church in Israel*, pp. 170-171. Among the Presidents of the Alliance served Hayim Joseph Haimoff and Shlomo Ze’ev Kofsman.

Assembly as an Ottoman Society.⁴¹ In this letter the founders asked to implement their civilian right for achieving legal recognition for JBY according to the *Declaration of Independence* of the State of Israel. They wrote:

*We are an Assembly of Messianic Jews, Jews who believe in Yeshua the Messiah who came in the past and will return in the future as the Almighty promised in the Old Testament. We neither converted our religion nor our faith since the Messiah himself said 'I did not come to abolish the Torah but to fulfill it.'*⁴²

In their letter Kofsman and his friends expressed to the authorities that 2000 years ago Messianic Jews were part and parcel of the Jewish Nation in Jerusalem, and together with their people went to the Diaspora, suffered expulsions and wanderings. Now JBY were returning to the Land with the ingathering of the people according to biblical prophecy. They emphasized that "out of belief in our Messiah, in our thoughts and deeds we share the destiny of our people."⁴³ In their application they frequently compared the situation of JBY to the model of Abraham who was required by God to follow a unique path.

Only about a year later was the request for legal recognition granted. For the first time in the State of Israel a corporation of JBY received legal approbation.⁴⁴ This unprecedented registration of a Messianic *Kehila* enabled the group to act openly and to fulfill, as a legitimate entity, the declared aims of the congregation: to provide a framework for common worship (*Avodat Adonai*), for mutual encouragement and for providing spiritual and material assistance to members of the Assembly. The original meeting place of the assembly was on 233 Prophets Street in Jerusalem, the residential apartment of Kofsman.⁴⁵

Interestingly, in the official constitution of the Assembly which was presented to the government, no specific details were given concerning their articles of faith. Probably the reason for that was that they anticipated "too delicate questions" from the Ministry and wished to avoid procedural complications because of theological issues. The formal membership in the Assembly was not stipulated

⁴¹ The legal status of an Ottoman Society passed from the Turkish rule in the Land through the Mandatory regime directly to the Israeli statutory system. In 1980 the status of Ottoman Society was cancelled and instead the Israeli Law introduced the Amuta structure that provides a legal framework for non-profit and charitable associations.

⁴² Gershon Nerel, *Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel*, pp.171-172.

⁴³ Copy of letter dated 23.2.1957, written by Kofsman in response to another letter from the Ministry of Interior, official File no. 11/620, dated 16.1.1957.

⁴⁴ A letter with a positive reply was sent to Kofsman on February 25, 1958. The foundation of the Messianic Assembly as an Ottoman Society was publicized according to the rules in the daily newspaper "Davar" on Friday March 7, 1958, p. 6, under the code number 9960.

⁴⁵ Kofsman immigrated to Israel in 1948 after the State was established. He died in 1976 and was buried in the central Jewish cemetery of Givat-Shaul in Jerusalem. His two daughters and widow eventually left the country.

on baptism; however, within their inner circles they made it very clear that they literally believed in Scripture, Old and New Testaments, in miracles, including the virgin birth of Yeshua, in Messiah's deity and in Israel's election and end-time role.⁴⁶

In 1961 the Assembly moved from Prophets Street to 4 Gershon Agron Street near Kings Hotel. They moved into a large building that was owned then by the Assemblies of God. Out of his Pentecostal and Charismatic convictions Kofsman developed close contacts with the French and American Assemblies. A detailed list of "Articles of Faith" was published by Kofsman in the French magazine "Shalom" that was edited by the French Pentecostals who supported him financially. In this "creed" it was written:

*The Messianic Assembly of Jerusalem believes in the complete Word of God and does not reject any truth that it reveals. The Assembly believes in: 1) Salvation through the grace of Yeshua, both for Jew and for Gentile; 2) Forgiveness of sins through the blood of Yeshua; 3) Repentance and faith that are instrumental for salvation; 4) Baptism in water by immersion; 5) Baptism of the Holy Spirit accompanied with spiritual manifestations; 6) Spiritual gifts granted for the edification of the Assembly; 7) Miracles of divine healing; 8) The second coming of Yeshua as declared by the Prophets and Apostles; 9) God's rightful judgement of the living and the dead through Yeshua; 10) All other truths explicitly expressed in Scripture.*⁴⁷

Kofsman did not look at the Assembly merely as a local congregation in Jerusalem. He rather had a national vision that the Assembly should function as an umbrella organization for the whole body of JBY in Israel. This idea was mainly reflected in the new magazine named *Halapid* (The Torch), that became the official organ of the Assembly. This publication, edited by "Rabbi Kofsman, Rabbi Ben-Meir, Rabbi Goldin and Rina Preiss,"⁴⁸ intended to speak for all JBY in Israel and to represent their views in public. The motto of the editors in *Halapid* was to restore the characteristics of the first-century Jerusalem congregation of JBY.

Kofsman and his colleagues wished to bridge a gap of almost 2000 years of history and mentality. As a matter of fact, the Assembly was regarded by these leaders as a direct continuation or revival, both ideologically and actively, of the primitive Jewish church in Jerusalem. They grasped this continuation as a

⁴⁶ In his Shabbat and mid-week sermons Kofsman, like Ben-Meir, Poljak, Ostrovsky and Haimoff, interpreted Old and New Testaments almost verbatim, accepting the infallibility of Scripture. He used to say in French: 'Parole de Dieu infaillible.' Namely, the canonical status of Scripture was beyond doubt for them.

⁴⁷ "Confession de foi," in *Shalom*, Journal d'information de l'oeuvre de Dieu parmi son peuple en Israel, Granville, Manche, # 18, Juin 1961, p. 3.

⁴⁸ *Halapid* appeared irregularly only in Hebrew and had only four issues, between 1960-1962. Its subtitle was: "The Organ of the Israeli Messianic Assembly that is the reestablishment of the early authentic Messianic *Kehila*."

natural spiritual development, precisely parallel to the pattern of the modern Jewish nation that returns to its homeland, reviving its sovereignty and national identity through the Zionist movement. Namely, "exactly as the Jews do not come to this land as foreigners or invaders, but to inherit the patrimony of their fathers, so we do not come to the Israeli Messianic Assembly as proselytes, but rather we who are saved return to our spiritual possession."⁴⁹

Although the Assembly endeavored since its foundation until the late 1960's to become *the* general roof organization for all JBY in Israel, as for example its constitution also mentioned the planting of other branches under its auspices, in practice it eventually became merely a local congregation in Jerusalem. The Assembly had no "satellite fellowships" as it originally expected to develop. In fact the various congregations of JBY in Israel that expanded throughout the years preferred to establish independent infrastructures of their own. These other younger congregations were also established only on the local level.

Thus we do not find in Israel the formation of a national Jewish church according to a pyramidal system, as it exists, for example, within the traditional "State Churches" in the Lutheran and Anglican worlds. Similarly, the Messianic Body in Israel did not adopt the structural system of the Jewish Chief Rabbinate that was created by the British in Mandatory Palestine to counterbalance the Moslem and Christian religious institutions in the Land. Furthermore, Kofsman's vision to establish a "Messianic Jewish Community" (*Eda Meshihit*), expecting to achieve unique rights as given to the other recognized religious communities in Israel like, for example, the Karaites, was not realized.⁵⁰ If, however, such a move had been successful, it probably would have caused the statutory incorporation of JBY as a Christian denomination in Israel, alongside the other churches, and thus would have affected the development of a Jewish identity and witness.

In 1969 the Assembly needed to leave the building it occupied, as the Assemblies of God decided to sell their property in Agron Street on the commercial market. On this occasion the Assembly reshaped its membership and its charismatic focus. A new start began in the life of the Assembly on Shabbat December 6 1969, when other JBY in Jerusalem chose to join Kofsman's Assembly. The central persons in the new formation were as follows: Ze'ev and Yvette Kofsman, Yaakov and Leah Goren, Victor and Suzy Smadja, Elias and

⁴⁹ Ze'ev Kofsman, "Prolegomena," in *Halapid*, vol. 1, January 1st 1960, pp. 2-4.

⁵⁰ In principle Israel follows the British "Religious Communities Organization Ordinance," put in practice since 1926. See R.H. Drayton, *The Laws of Palestine*, II, London 1934, pp. 1292-1293.

Ruth Sarikas, Hayim and Elisheva Fastman, Zvi and Neomi Kalisher, Gaston and Suzan Gigi, Amikam Tavor and Rachel Greenberg.⁵¹ Victor Smadyah split from the Finnish Lutheran Shalhevetyah congregation and brought with him many from this congregation into the new merger.

The new meeting place of the Assembly was on 56 Prophets Street, in a building that then belonged to the "Christian and Missionary Alliance." During the British Mandate this building was called "House of Seekers After Truth" (*Beit Dorshet Emet*) and served as a library and reading-room.⁵² After a short negotiation with Warren Graham, the C&MA representative in Israel, on January 27, 1971 the Assembly was notified that the C&MA had received a donation for the property and transferred it to the congregation as a gift, free of charge. We should also point out that since the early 1970's the Assembly has been responsible for annually arranging summer camps for Messianic children and teenagers. These activities, on a national basis, are open to youngsters from all the congregations in Israel and are supported by volunteers from all over the country.⁵³ We should also add that during the 1990s a joint summer camp venture was developed by the greater Tel Aviv (Gush Dan) congregations at Baptist Village.

The Place of the Historical Creeds

As Messianic Jews in Israel come from differing and even opposing theological backgrounds, like the Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists, Brethren, Pentecostals and Calvinists, as well as those who call themselves "free thinkers," they could hardly agree upon a common and official creed. In fact even the term 'creed' *per se* sometimes became problematic for them and often it is simply avoided. "Creed" reminds them of the traditional creeds of the historical churches that they refused to accept. The formulas of the various creeds and symbols of the early Church, and many other dogmas that were adopted both within the Catholic and the Protestant worlds, are frequently regarded by them as unbiblical. Thus certain Messianic Jews like Moshe Ben-Meir could not separate the contents of the Nicean Creed from anti-Jewish resolutions of the AD 325 Nicean Council.

⁵¹ *Record of Minutes of the Israeli Messianic Assembly*, 6.12. 1969, p. 1. Five members were elected on 14.2.1970 as the "Assembly Committee" (*Vaad Hakehila*): Ze'ev Shlomo Kofsman (Chairman), Victor Smadja (Secretary) and Yaakov Goren (Treasurer). I am indebted to Elias Sarikas for this source.

⁵² Also called the "Tin Tabernacle." See William F. Smalley, ed., *Alliance Missions in Palestine, Arab Lands and Israel, 1890-1970*, A mimeographed compilation of sources, C&MA, New-York, New-York, 1971, pp. 221-222, 501-502. During the 1930's and 1940's Haim Haimoff used to work here as a librarian.

⁵³ For more than two decades the youth activities of the Assembly have been carried out under the supervision of Warren and Linda Graham. See also: Jacob Goren, "Summer Camp in Jerusalem," in *The Chosen People*, November 1972, p. 5.

For Messianic Jews the Creeds of the traditional Churches are an integral part of the "apostate gentile theologies" that intentionally abandoned the Jewish heritage and instead chose pagan practices like Christmas trees, Santa Clauses and Easter Bunnies. Thus the historical creeds are not viewed by Messianic Jews as binding or as precise and authoritative expressions of faith. For them the creeds represent the churches that dropped the biblical calendar and feasts and aimed at replacing the Jews as *Verus Israel*, the true Israel.

Hayim Haimoff, for example, asked if a creed is necessary, as it might detract basic aspects of the whole truth. Namely, is a creed or a catechism, as a "theological extract," too minimizing for the biblical faith? In the fellowship that gathered in his home in Ramat-Gan, Haimoff taught that the entire body of verses scattered throughout Scripture should be regarded as a "comprehensive creed." In fact Haimoff also used to explain that Holy Scripture should be interpreted in its totality, without limiting its message solely to few sentences.⁵⁴

Particularly with regard to Christological definitions, many Messianic Jews deliberately preferred to avoid reference to any traditional ecclesiastical creed. They insisted on using New Testament terminology exclusively, without mentioning, for example, the concept of the "Trinity" in the formal text of an approved creed. In other words, they were convinced that when coming to christological definitions, the use of the Hebrew language would naturally make a substantial difference. Thus, for example, they argued that within a single and simple Hebrew term, the concept of "Messiah," the full divinity as well as the complete humanity of the Savior were reflected. Interestingly, could we today discover some similar patterns with regard to the messianic attributes given to the 'Lubavitcher' Rabbi, Menachem Schneerson, of the 'Chabad' movement?

Some Messianic Jews even refrain from openly mentioning that there are three persons of one identical substance in the godhead. Thus the Christological concepts within their circles are not necessarily reflected within their exegesis through terms like *personae* and *naturae*. When they do refer to Christological issues they prefer phrases taken from the Bible, relying upon the canonical authority of the text. They sense they are expressing themselves in the same way that the first apostles did. They desire to develop nonconformist hermeneutics.

At the same time, however, teachers like Baruch Maoz, the founder and leader of "Grace and Truth Christian Assembly,"⁵⁵ openly publicized a short "credo," saying *inter alia*, that:

⁵⁴ Haim Joseph Haimoff, "A Letter from Haifa," in *Salvation*, American Association for Jewish Evangelism, vol. 10, #3, March 1956, p. 8.

⁵⁵ Since 1974 Baruch Maoz has been the editor of *Me'et Le'et* Messianic magazine. "Grace and Truth Christian Assembly" was founded in 1976. This Assembly gathered first in Rehovot and is now located in Rishon Letzion.

*We believe in the unity of the Godhead and in the co-equality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, sovereign in creation, providence and redemption. That Jesus is Israel's promised Messiah. He came to this world as a real human being, born of a virgin, everlasting and fully both God and man. In the community of believers of all ages, and in the Church.*⁵⁶

Maoz in fact regrets that "great doctrinal statements on the church are often neglected," and that "the most common underlying theology of the Christian faith in Israel is an undefined and unconscious Arminianism."⁵⁷ This view is expressed as contrasted with emphasized Calvinist teachings like predestination.

Jewish believers in Yeshua are very much aware of the fact that sometimes their non-Jewish Christian brothers in faith, both in Israel and abroad, still expect them to automatically adopt the creeds of the traditional churches. While ignoring or bypassing the historical creeds, sometimes Messianic Jews are not really tolerated by certain ecclesiastics who consider them "too Judaistic" and even regard them as "heretical Ebionites."

Per Østerbye and Messianic Jewish Articles of Faith

While examining the "creed" of "The Israeli Messianic Assembly" as it is reflected in *Halapid*, the Danish historian Per Østerbye claims that it has "many omissions" and that JBY, in order to please other Jews, are too apologetic in their theology. Namely that "the creed is made more indefinite" in comparison to the "Apostolic Creed," and that JBY intentionally omit the divinity of Yeshua as the Son of God, "a most controversial point for Jews."⁵⁸

Obviously Østerbye's starting point for such comparisons is the text of the church creeds. However, Østerbye referred only to the five points of the "creed" and completely ignored other articles in *Halapid* that absolutely relate to the divine character of Yeshua, his virgin birth, etc. Thus, for example, in a long article entitled "The Tasks of King Messiah," Moshe Immanuel Ben-Meir widely presents his "orthodox" christological concepts. It seems, therefore, that a more thorough reading of Messianic Hebrew texts would have prevented Østerbye from reaching hasty conclusions.

Interestingly, Ben-Meir even argued that a "minimalistic creed" of seven words in Hebrew is sufficient to express a serious christological doctrine. JBY, according to him, should rely solely upon the basis of one short statement: "I

⁵⁶ Leaflet *Introducing Grace and Truth Christian Assembly*, POBox 75, Rishon Letzion, n.d.

⁵⁷ Baruch Maoz, *The Gospel Scene in Israel*, Christian Witness to Israel, Chislehurst, Kent n.d., p.7.

⁵⁸ Per Østerbye, *The Church in Israel*, p. 158.

believe with a perfect faith in Yeshua the Messiah the Lord."⁵⁹ Ben-Meir's argument is explained as follows:

We do not seek to escape anything. If our seven-worded creed causes offense, misunderstanding, and suggests some doubts as to our orthodoxy and fundamentalism, it is not our fault. The fault lies at the door of the so-called "Church Fathers." The creed that we, Messianic Jews, repeat is the rock-bottom foundation of the Church of God. Formulated by St. Peter under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, it was ratified by our Lord Himself. Turn to Matt. 16:15. The Hebrew concept expressed by the word Hamashiah is the seed-plot of all saving faith and saving truths. This word covers and includes every detail in the divine plan of Redemption, each and every fact and truth that should and must be believed with the heart in order to be eternally saved.⁶⁰

Clearly both Østerbye and Ben-Meir do not represent merely their private views on these matters. Especially with regard to these issues the linguistic dimension is of utmost importance.

Conclusion

Not each and every believer in Yeshua, Jew or gentile, envisioned the establishment of a Messianic Jewish Church in Eretz-Israel. The opponents of this idea argued that JBY are indeed the stem of a large tree, yet they should not officially separate themselves from the worldwide body of Messiah.

The "Union" in 1951, the "Alliance" in 1958 and the "Fellowship" in 1969 were disbanded mainly because of personal and theological disagreements. A central issue in those conflicts was whether to permit, on the one hand, the involvement of non-Jewish Christians, e.g. from the local missions and churches, and on the other hand, to permit the involvement of representatives from Messianic Jewish organizations abroad like the IHCA.

In reaction to attempts to create an independent and genuine corporate entity of JBY, leaders among the missionary organizations in Israel decried them as manifesting renewed "Judaizing" tendencies. However, while the gentile Christians spoke about belonging to the universal body of believers in Yeshua, practically they looked after the specific interests of their denominations.⁶¹ Furthermore, fears were also expressed in the same circles in reaction to the possibility of having a modern Jewish-Israeli Protestant "Bishop" in Jerusalem.

Such a development, so non-Jewish Church leaders reasoned, would

⁵⁹ In Hebrew: "Ani Ma'amin Be-emuna Shelema Be-Yeshua Hamashiach Haadon."

⁶⁰ Moshe I. Ben-Meir. *The Creed of Messianic Jews in the Land of Israel*, Haifa n.d. (no. 63 in list of articles in Manuscript form). See also Gershon Nerel, *Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel* pp. 175-180.

⁶¹ See, for example, Max Enker, "Abschied von Israel," in *Der Zeuge*, No. 20, November 1958, pp. 8-10.

undermine the traditional authority and prestige of the existing gentile ecclesiastical leadership. An independent and authoritative Jewish bishop, sitting on the See of James (Yaakov), brother of Jesus in Jerusalem, could, so they reasoned, decrease the gentile spiritual prerogatives not only in the Holy Land but in the global Christian milieu as well.⁶²

It seems that the source for tensions within a "Messianic Congregation," past and present, focuses around the question of which *modus vivendi* to follow within fellowships in which both Jewish and gentile believers worship together. Often the non-Jews wish to retain the church traditions of the past two millennia. The Jews, on the other hand, wish to ignore many of these traditions and restore the Jewishness of the primitive Jerusalem Church. The International Hebrew Christian Alliance, for example, faced this problem when it distinguished between full members (Jews) and associates (non-Jews). This seems to be the real reason behind the policy adopted by the IHCA to drop its original vision to create a unique national Church for JBY.

As a matter of fact, the IHCA set a significant example when it reversed its "Church policy" and decided that by all means JBY should not establish a worldwide exclusive Jewish church. It seems that the same pattern of endorsing the principle of maintaining a free Fellowship of Messianic Jewish congregations was practically followed also in Eretz-Israel. Maintaining a loose fellowship between the various groups was preferred rather than promoting the oversight of a constitutional church headed by a Messianic Bishop or an Archbishop.

However, many leaders of the early and formative decades of the State of Israel, like Abram ("Bram") Poljak, Moshe Ben-Meir, Hayim Joseph Haimoff (Bar-David), Solomon Ostrovsky and Shlomo Ze'ev Kofsmann were expressing a strong and common belief in the fulfillment of biblical prophecies concerning the end-time. Especially they taught that the establishment of the State of Israel marks a prophetic milestone, highlighting the special task of JBY through the variety of their grouping forms. Thus, either through home fellowships, national institutions or an international alliance, JBY realize that they fill a significant part in the historical process that intensively leads toward Yeshua's soon return.

⁶² See, for example, Hubert Panteny, "This Time, and Our Task," in *Jerusalem*, no 62/63, November/December 1951, pp. 6-8; Moshe I Ben Meir, "Our Mission," no. 53 in list of manuscripts, Jerusalem, n.d.; cf. David A. Rausch, "Hebrew Christian Renaissance and Early Conflict with Messianic Judaism," in *Fides et Historia*, vol 15, 1983, pp. 67-79; See also recently: Gershon Nerel, "Primitive Jewish Christians in the Modern Thought of Messianic Jews," in *Le judéo-christianisme ancien; Histoire, littérature, archéologie*, Proceedings of International Colloquium at the École biblique in Jerusalem, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1999 (forthcoming).