



Israel at 50

In 1998 the State of Israel solemnly celebrates its first Jubilee year. Many Bible believers agree that the establishment of the modern Jewish state signifies an outstanding landmark in world history. The ingathering and restoration of the Jewish People in Eretz Israel – the Land of Israel – is a living fulfilment of the fig tree parable and prophecy of Yeshua (Matthew 24). Alongside the physical revival of Israel and the miraculous resurgence of the dry bones of Ezekiel 37, we have also witnessed the rebirth of a small yet significant remnant in our land – the body of Jewish believers in Yeshua.

Israelisation and Hebraisation

We “guesstimate” the overall number of Messianic Jews (Yehudim Meshihiim) in Israel to be about 5,000, scattered in cities, villages and kibbutzim, from Eilat in the south to Naharia in the north. Numbers have especially risen during the last decade, when Israel absorbed about a million new immigrants (olim) – among them were several hundred Russian and Amharic (Ethiopian) speaking Messianic Jews. Altogether there are about fifty groups of Jewish believers in Israel today.

In comparison to previous waves of immigrants in the 1950's and '60's, when Hebrew was less well established, we may expect the younger generation of these olim to adopt colloquial Hebrew very rapidly. This will come by attending Israeli schools and then during the long military service. However, alongside those olim who feel that they become Israelis from their very first days in the land, we also face those who cannot cope with the difficulties and eventually leave the country. Moreover, while some individuals and families among the olim join the already existing congregations, many of them still prefer to associate in groups where they can speak their mother tongue.

About 90% of Jewish believers in Israel were not born here and have the same mixture of cultural backgrounds as the rest of Israeli society. We also observe the gradually growing numbers of *Sabras* – the locally born – joining our circles. Alongside those who were born within a Messianic Jewish family, we also embrace those who almost daily accept Yeshua outside of their native families. Although Israeli Jewish believers are a tiny minority, they greatly stimulate public interest and often appear on the public agenda.

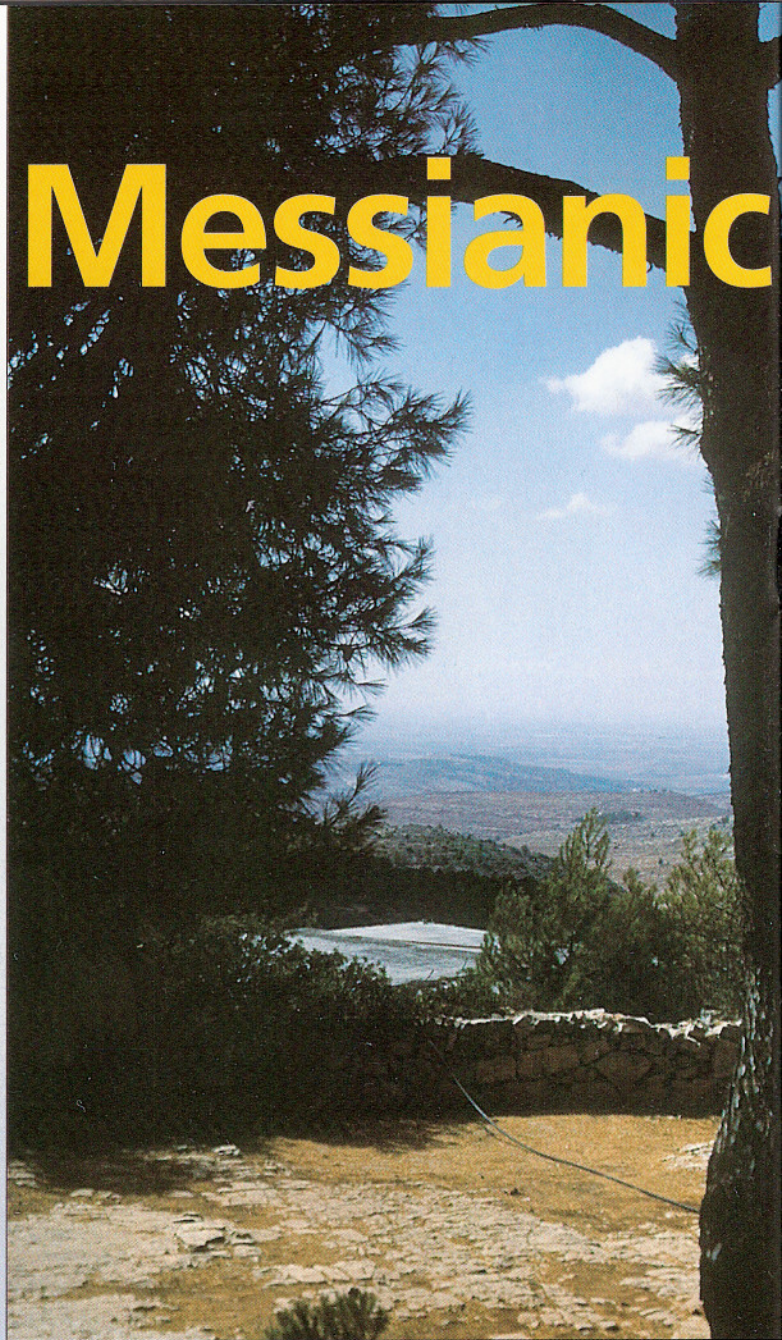
Worship and Identity

Many Jewish believers are attracted to regional and national conferences which are occasionally arranged in Israel, as for example, during the feast of Shavuot (Pentecost). Yet the centre of gravity is the local congregation, where they endeavour to develop an indigenous identity. Their meeting places may be in a private home, an assembly hall, or in a traditional church building. Jewish believers meet regularly on Shabbat (Saturday) and not on Sunday for their main worship services. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, observing the Sabbath became de facto a non-issue. The seventh day Sabbath was officially anchored within Israeli law as the weekly Jewish day of rest. Since most Jewish believers wanted to maintain their Jewish identity, they found it natural to rest and worship on this seventh day.

The same development occurred regarding the other biblical feasts, especially Pesach (Passover). By preferring to celebrate Pesach according to the Jewish calendar, Jewish believers express their identification with their biblical heritage and with their people. On the other hand, the celebration of Easter, distanced in the calendar from Pesach according to traditional Christian calculation, is regarded by them as a means to introduce them into a gentilised and even pagan world.

Similarly, some non-Jewish believers in Yeshua expect Jewish believers to be “good Christians” by celebrating Christmas exactly on 25 December, and even with a Christmas tree! Here too Messianic Jews find a pagan tradition of “churchianity” which they refuse to accept, and they celebrate the Jewish feast of Hanukkah instead. Often Jewish believers find no reason to refuse to send their

Messianic



The view from Yad ha Sh'monah, the moshav which is the Nerel's home.

children to Israeli state schools on 25 December which, of course, have no holiday on that date. However, some Messianic communities still wish to commemorate the incarnation of Messiah together with the universal body of Immanuel. They may do so on a regular Sabbath service, before or following the 25 December, when they might, for example, read the relevant biblical texts and sing carols.

Connections with missionary organisations

Since the nineteenth century, Protestant missionary organisations in Israel have functioned as a “spiritual cradle” for many local Messianic Jewish individuals and families. In some exceptional cases these organisations were also instrumental in forming indigenous congregations. Among these we can mention societies like British CMJ, American Christian and Missionary Alliance, Finnish Lutheran Mission, Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel and the Chicago Hebrew Mission. The common ground for all these organisations was the vision to present

Jews in the Land

the gospel of Yeshua to the Jews. They expected both Israel's salvation through Yeshua and the imminent Second Coming of the Messiah. Sadly, only a few representatives of these organisations wholeheartedly identified themselves with the local attempts to revive an independent "Hebrew Church" and usually this was only on a personal and unofficial level.

The mainstream of the established church leadership in Israel nurtured the idea that Hebrew Christians must not separate themselves in any way from the mother churches, but rather integrate themselves into them. Such an approach meant the assimilation and disappearance of Messianic Jews within Gentile churches and was repeatedly rejected by them. In fact Jewish believers grasped their own mission as an independent Jewish entity, functioning as unique witnesses for Yeshua.

Messianic Jews were usually accepted into the established churches only as individuals. As an organised and corporate body, Jewish believers could not find an independent place within the Gentile ecclesiastical milieu in Eretz Israel, and thus they looked for their own structures. Groups of Jewish believers used various titles such as: fellowship, assembly, congregation, society, union and alliance; but they seldom adopted the title, "church", for

their groups. Consequently, they could be characterised as permanently striving for theological and ecclesiastical emancipation.

Following the birth of the State of Israel, more and more expatriate missionaries joined local congregations and submitted themselves to the national leadership of Jewish believers. Thus, for example, some of them were helpful in organising youth activities, or in providing daily assistance towards the shaping of the indigenous infrastructure – according to the guidelines set by the Israelis.

In particular missionary organisations allowed the use of their real estate assets for the needs of the local believers. All those societies that have worked in the country since the Ottoman and Mandatory periods had acquired a considerable quantity of large buildings and land. These properties were often made available for Jewish believers to start their own initiatives there. Examples of this are at Stella Carmel and Beit Immanuel (CMJ), and the Messianic Assembly on Prophets Street in Jerusalem (C&MA).

On the other hand, we also experienced an unfortunate case when one of the missions sold an important compound which already served Messianic Jews in the heart of Jerusalem. Such sales for high market prices were justified by investing the money outside of Israel. However, from an Israeli perspective, such commercial sales were done against the vision which the missionaries originally presented to Jewish believers, and were a violation of their commitment to support the local Messianic Jewish body. It should be remembered that Jewish believers can hardly find other substitutes to the land sold by churches.

Gershon Nerel is Israel Secretary of the International Messianic Jewish Alliance. Pictured here with his wife Sara, at his graduation ceremony from the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, where the title of his dissertation was "Messianic Jews in Eretz Israel (1917 – 1967): Trends and Changes in Shaping Self Identity". Gershon stresses that he doesn't always wear a suit and tie!

To obtain private ownership of land in Israel is almost impossible. More than 90% of land in the country is owned by the State. The rest is in the hands of others, like churches and missions, that purchased the land prior to the establishment of the State. When locals "purchase" a piece of land from the land authorities, it is only by a lease contract, to be renewed

after several decades. Therefore, in the future, the available property within missionary ownership in Israel must be utilised after many prayers and with special wisdom.

Legal and civilian status

According to the judgements of the Israeli Supreme Court, sitting as the High Court of Justice, Jews who believe in Yeshua and follow the commandments of the New Testament are no longer regarded as Jews. Theoretically, and sometimes also practically, Messianic Jews are deprived of various rights which result from the Law of Return, particularly the right to become automatically registered as Jewish citizens. Following two keynote petitions to the High Court (the 1962 case of Oswald Rufeisen, also known as brother Daniel, and the 1989 case of Gary Beresford) a legal precedent was set concerning who is no longer accepted as a Jew. In the first case a secular concept and definition for "Jew" was introduced – namely, that the average person in the street refuses to accept a believer in Yeshua as Jewish. Under rabbinical law (halachah), however, a "converted Jew" still remains a Jew for almost all purposes; yet the State Law of Return and the Registration of Inhabitants Ordinance was not constructed according to the traditional Jewish religious law.

Obviously the consequences of such a ruling are not limited only to the Law of Return. It affects Jewish issues like performance of marriages, and burial ceremonies as well as control over burial grounds, which are fully monopolised by the Rabbinate. In Israel we may find a believer in Buddha who is still regarded as a Jew, but a Jewish believer in Yeshua is "legally excommunicated". However, we believe that, in the due course of time, a change in the Jewish attitude towards Yeshua could still be grasped as Messianic Jews become more accepted. Even in Israel, the laws must follow life and not life the laws.

Conclusion

In 1948 there were only about 20 Messianic Jews in the State of Israel, whereas today we speak of a dynamic and growing Messianic movement of thousands. We are grateful to our Saviour to be privileged to watch out second, third and even fourth generations. The prophetic fig tree signifies that we are living in the very last days of this age, and that the coming of our Lord for his bride is imminent.

Gershon Nerel

