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Conference Theme

Yeshua
for
Israel

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20 June

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Struggling for Identity:

Jewish Believers in Yeshua in Eretz-Israel (1850-1950)

By Gershon NereI

Probably more than in any other place in the world, in Eretz-Israel, the Land of Israel, Jewish believers in Yeshua (=JBY) are compelled to define and express their identity under the close scrutiny of Synagogue and Church at one and the same time. In fact, this situation is not a new phenomenon but rather a long process, with deep roots that go back to the 19th century. In our own time, we too live in a day when this process of self-determination is still going on, and this identity is being shaped by both Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Yeshua.

In the century between the years 1850-1950 God had manifested His miraculous guidance, working simultaneously in different parts of the world. We easily note in the second half of the 19th century the appearance of individuals and organizations promoting a renewed self-determination for Jews who believe in Yeshua as Savior and Lord. This global phenomenon covered cities from London to Kishineff and continents from Europe to America. Yet in my view it is in Eretz-Israel that one can find the true consummation of the whole process.

1. Protestant and Catholic Backgrounds

It was Eretz-Israel that attracted thousands of Jews bringing with them various backgrounds and beliefs into a melting pot. From our point of view, three Hebrew Christian pioneers stand out: the Protestant Bishop Michael Solomon Alexander, and the two Catholic monks, Alphonse and Theodore Ratisbonne who were brothers. These personalities actually represented

the modern initiation of the collective restoration of JBY to their ancient Homeland.

We should also remember that the process of self-identification among JBY in the Land followed the direction of two 'macro-lines': one within Protestant circles and the other within a Catholic milieu. Sometimes these lines coincided and even formed together a cross-road of common views and mutual interests. This happened, for example, when both sides eventually incorporated the same translations of the New Testament into the Hebrew language for worship and study. On other occasions, however, the two sides confronted each other presenting their very different theologies and approaches to faith. In the use of liturgical vocabulary and practices as well, many disagreements have arisen between 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' JBY.

In summary, we can not ignore the fact that there existed in the Land a parallel process which developed among all JBY: the "Catholic level", on the one hand, and the "Protestant level" on the other hand.

Within these two circles we observe that there was also a serious concern for practical-material issues; for example, they invested huge financial resources in establishing an infrastructure that would provide them with elementary facilities in the Land. Thus, both Alexander and Ratisbonne initiated the building of monumental compounds in Jerusalem: the "Protestant Compound" within the Old City walls near Jaffa gate, and the "Catholic Compound" outside the walls in the "Rehavia" neighborhood in West

Jerusalem. These facilities served mainly as places of worship and study, and they still function and serve the same bodies today. At the same time, the founders also wanted to create new sources of livelihood in agriculture and light-industry enterprises.

Very often, however, they were preoccupied with the issue of how precisely to define and to maintain their unique status. In fact, they were in constant battle, refuting accusations against them as if they were practicing a "double loyalty" – to Church and Synagogue – at the same time. Such accusations also reflected a situation in which neither Church nor Synagogue had much confidence in them.

Of course, such allegations of dual loyalty were not new nor original, and they were not unique to Eretz-Israel. However, charges of this kind became more and more intensified in the Land, which was already overcrowded with representatives from almost every Church and denomination in Christendom. Those representatives had their own interests within their expatriate organizational politics, and as such impacted on the local body of JBY. Thus, for example, no expatriate Christian hierarchical personnel would accept another parallel autonomous local staff which would function independent of the parent body.

In the following survey I shall focus on the developments that characterized JBY who were in the theological sense closer to the Protestant world.

2. 'Holy Geography' and 'Holy Wars'

In Eretz Israel, a very small and condensed geographical territory, Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Yeshua were constantly confronted with historical and theological memories connected to the Bible. These were closely related in almost every place. This fact created by itself a strong impulse that played a significant role in the process of self-identification. Therefore, especially in Jerusalem, theological differences were even sharper. Thus, issues that were regarded as ultimate truth and as a test of

orthodoxy, such as creedal definitions and observance of traditions, were often a source of great tensions in the relations between locals and expatriates in the Holy Land.

Theologians from all sides often felt compelled in the Land where Messianic-Christian faith had begun to launch a crusade or fight a "holy war", in order to defend and preserve a particular truth and a particular orthodoxy. Besides the Churches, Jewish rabbinical circles also launched a battle to inhibit any tendency to legitimize and combine the terms of 'Jew and Christian' into one concept. As they perceived it, Eretz-Israel was THEIR geographical domain and such a concept of 'Jew and Christian' was no less than an existential threat to their spiritual authority.

One substantive issue was very visible: the 'Holy Land' was a 'real recollection'. The historical sites constantly revived a collective memory of the past, and thus also played a role in shaping self-identity in the present. Living in such a unique location, JBY quite naturally aspired to bridge a gap between their contemporary identity and an authentic New Testament identity. The New Testament, as they interpreted it, reflected for them the self-identity of the first century Jewish messianic community.

Thus, living and toiling in Jerusalem was more than enough to stimulate among them a strong desire to become the heirs and the formal representatives of their messianic forefathers. They cultivated the notion that they had at last returned to Jerusalem to restore not only an ancient continuity as a legitimate body standing for itself, but they had come to take a leading role within a new phase of "Jewish Reformation". They wanted to inspire from Eretz-Israel all believers in Yeshua, and non believers as well. In other words, JBY in the Land thought that they had to re-establish the authority which had been held by JBY in the formative years of the Church in the first century. Their aim was to spread to the world a vital and genuine

"Teaching FROM Zion" rather than to accept teaching from abroad. Leaders like Ben-Meir, for example, explained that the 'Times of the Gentiles' were coming to an end, and the Jewish believers would assume spiritual leadership in the world.

No doubt, many among the Gentile Christians in the Land did not remain indifferent to such interpretations. To a few of them, it had become a real threat to their own status and authority. For example, the slightest chance that there would again be a Jewish Bishop like Michael Solomon Alexander in Jerusalem, was seen as a real threat which would undermine the existing authority of non-Jewish Church dignitaries, especially the Anglican Bishop in the Holy City. Furthermore, they believed that any claims of JBY to restore an apostolic succession to the first Jerusalem Church would polarize the 'modus vivendi' between JBY and Gentile Christians.

Such a development was not merely a question of spiritual or theological authority. It had clear financial and institutional implications. Any increase of the authority or influence of local and independent JBY could sooner or later cause a decrease in the non-Jewish presence in the Land. Such an outcome could, as it was then perceived, affect the number of personnel and the financial status of mission & Church organizations. As a result, leading clergymen and missionaries fought – sometimes openly and sometimes secretly – to keep the historical "status quo", and not to allow any changes in the status of local Jewish believers.

3. Connections with the Established Churches

For decades, dozens of JBY were part and parcel of the Church membership in the Land, mainly within the Anglican compounds in Jerusalem and Jaffa, and within the "American Church" of the 'Christian and Missionary Alliance' (=C&MA). In these circles, JBY did, however, find a few individuals who belonged to the Gentile clergy or mission

personnel and yet wholeheartedly identified themselves, usually personally, with local attempts to revive an independent "Hebrew Church" in the Land. Among them at least two names should be mentioned: Rev. Hastings Kelk, from the "London Jews Society" (known today as "Church's Ministry among the Jews" = CMJ) in the 19th century, and Miss Bernice Gibson, from the C&MA staff, in the 20th century.

The mainstream of the Gentile Church leadership in the Land, however, nurtured the idea that 'Hebrew Christians' must not separate themselves in any way from the established Gentile Churches, but rather integrate themselves into them. Thus, for example, the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, Graham Brown, expressed this idea in a letter he wrote in December 1940 to his superior, the Archbishop of Canterbury: "As I see the situation, the true policy for the Hebrew Christian is absorption into the local Christian Churches, and not by establishing a Hebrew Christian Church as a separate entity".

Such an approach could not have been hidden from the eyes of JBY. They immediately grasped the consequences of such a policy. Practically speaking, it would mean a simple repetition of the history of the past two millennia. If there was not the immediate loss of Jewish national identity through absorption into Christian Churches and society, then certainly the total assimilation of the second and third generations within Christendom would follow.

On the other hand, a major factor that forced "de facto" JBY to attend services at the traditional Churches was the State Law which existed and was implemented during the Ottoman Turkish regime and the British Government in Mandatory times. According to the prevailing legal system called "MILLET", which originated in the Ottoman Empire, only a recognized religious body such as a historical Church or Synagogue was allowed to provide religious services, and this only to its own membership. Thus, for Christians, marriage and baptismal

ceremonies could be performed only within a recognized Church. Therefore, JBY, who were not recognized by the authorities as an independent community functioning autonomously in the religious sphere, were totally dependent upon the recognized clergy in such situations for conducting these religious ceremonies.

Furthermore, a by-product of the MILLET system was that in a case of official Church baptism, the baptized person was automatically registered as having not only a new religion, but also as one acquiring at the same time a new nationality. Such a situation caused a serious dilemma for the baptized Jew in the Land who, not necessarily by choice, inevitably was defined as deserting his Jewish national community.

No doubt, such a legal compulsion resulted in a Jew often feeling reluctant to obtain an official certificate of baptism from the authorities, since official membership in a recognized Church in the Land automatically deprived a person of his Jewish connections. One can easily imagine the consequences of such a situation for a patriotic Jew.

4. Striving for Theological and Ecclesiastical 'Emancipation'

"Hebrew Christians", as they were always called by expatriate Church personnel (even when they preferred to be called "Messianic Jews", or "Yehudim Meshihiim" in the Hebrew language) were accepted into the established Churches only as individuals. As an organized and corporate body, JBY could not find a place within the Gentile ecclesiastical milieu in Eretz-Israel. They looked, therefore, for their own patterns of grouping.

In order to establish their own organized structures, JBY used various titles: 'Fellowship', 'Union', 'Alliance', 'Society', 'Assembly', 'Congregation' and 'Church'. However, it was not easy nor simple to use original terms in Hebrew without offending Jews or Gentiles. Particularly in Mandatory Palestine, JBY had invested much time and

energy (in correspondence and in meetings) in order to formulate new texts for their constitutions, while aiming at the creation of new corporate and indigenous entities. Basically, they wanted to maintain for themselves a special Jewish atmosphere in their meetings and worship, and also to manifest to others their Jewish character.

Thus, for example, by formulating their own charters, many JBY expressed their group identity. By incorporating new formulas of independent creeds into their charters, they deliberately distanced themselves from traditional Church Creeds, be it the "Apostle's Creed", the "Athanasian Creed" or the "Nicaean Creed". Instead of having such creedal adoptions, they actually developed new formulas that enabled them to express their beliefs, as they saw it, in Biblical terminology.

There were those like Moshe Emmanuel Ben-Meir who argued that it was sufficient, as a first theological phase, to formulate a simple creedal statement, such as: "I believe in the Bible, Old and New Testaments". Sometimes they would be satisfied even with simply declaring that: "I believe in Yeshua the Messiah the Lord". These JBY expected that through such short formulas in Hebrew, they would avoid creating an immediate confrontation with the Jewish surroundings in Eretz-Israel.

Such tendencies to minimize the importance of extra-Biblical creedal definitions were often criticized by non-Jewish believers in Yeshua, and sometimes JBY were even classified by the expatriates as holders of heretical views. However, they retorted that the Gentiles did not know enough Hebrew, nor were they adequately acquainted with messianic passages in the Old Testament, to understand the terminology used by contemporary local Jewish disciples of Yeshua.

As already noted, another misunderstanding arose between locals and expatriates when JBY who had mastered colloquial Hebrew preferred to use the term "Messianic Jew" instead of

"Hebrew Christian". In this paper we cannot analyze the reasons for this, but it is significant that decades before such nomenclature was changed in America and elsewhere (from "Hebrew Christian" to "Messianic Jew") it had been changed in Eretz-Israel, and this change became common after the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948.

In order to manifest the "emancipation" tendencies among JBY in the Land, I wish to refer to an extraordinary episode from the 1920's. Between 1925-1929 there was an attempt to establish an original Jewish-Christian congregation ('Kehilat Ivrim Meshihiim') in Jerusalem. The three co-founders were two JBY, Hyman Jacobs and Moshe Ben-Meir, and a Norwegian Lutheran, Dr. Arne Jonsen. They openly declared their desire to revive the first-century community in Jerusalem, and to emphasize Jewish national characteristics in their small congregation. Thus, for example, Hyman Jacobs had stated, *inter alia*, that: "A Hebrew Christian must NOT keep all the customs and days of the Gentile Churches which have accumulated in the last sixteen hundred years".¹

Such tendencies no doubt challenged both expatriate ecclesiastical tradition and authority. When JBY wanted to ignore "customs and days of Gentile Churches", they were represented as enforcing 'Judaistic' and 'obsolete' elements into the free Gospel of Christ.

5. Mutual Recriminations: 'Judaizers' vs. 'Gentilizers'

Jewish believers in Yeshua in Eretz-Israel, whose estimated numbers in the period under discussion were around 300 persons, often raised the issue of observing the Sabbath and the other Jewish Holy Days. As the country became more and more populated by Jews, following the mass waves of Jewish immigration, they felt that they should keep the national Sabbath day of rest, and not Sunday, which tended to 'gentilize' them even more.

Eventually, with the establishment of the

State of Israel it became a "non-issue" because the Sabbath was anchored within Israeli law as THE weekly Jewish day of rest. When most JBY 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 'Pessah' (Passover). By preferring to celebrate this feast according to the Jewish calendar, JBY identified with their Biblical heritage and with their people. On the other hand, the celebration of Easter, according to a historical Christian calculation, was regarded by them as a means to introduce them into a 'gentilized', and even pagan world.

Similarly, non-Jewish believers in Yeshua expected JBY to be "good Christians" by celebrating Christmas exactly on the 25th of December, and usually not without a Christmas tree. In Israel this was not a Jewish Feast. When JBY wanted to celebrate the birth of the Messiah, they often did so on a regular Sabbath service, before or following the 25th of December. Usually they also found no reason to refuse to send their children to Israeli State schools, which of course had no holiday on that date.

However, decades before the State was established, similar tendencies were often criticized by non-Jewish believers, alleging that JBY wanted to revive and introduce old 'Judaizing' policies into the universal body of believers, and that they did so only in order to win the support of the Jewish majority in Eretz-Israel. Furthermore, before the State of Israel was established, JBY were still hesitant to circumcise their new-born sons because Gentile Church personnel accused them of practicing 'irrelevant' Judaizing customs.

Such examples from daily life do show the existence of tensions between Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Yeshua in the Land. Yet it was obvious that such tensions became especially acute when the expatriate side did not view the situation in the Land as part of the fulfillment of Biblical

prophecy regarding the Jewish "dry bones" being restored to their Homeland. Thus, when not viewed in prophetic context, there were accusations by Gentiles of being "Judaized"; on the other hand, when they were viewed as prophetic developments, there were feelings by Jews of being 'gentilized'.

6. The 'Nicodemus Jews'

Alongside those JBY in Eretz-Israel who were well known within the mainstream Jewish community, there were also many others who had developed a strong underground mentality. The clandestine behavior of such believers followed a chosen way of secrecy. These secret believers in Yeshua walked in the footsteps of Nicodemus, who had dared to visit Yeshua secretly under the cover of darkness. They opposed any public exposure as JBY, not to mention any visible membership in an open congregation or meeting. Basically, they feared for their economic and social welfare. Particularly, they feared the social pressure coming from mainstream Jewish society that traditionally placed JBY "outside the camp" for allegedly betraying Jewish national solidarity.

Sometimes, severe tensions developed between JBY who were openly active as such, and the "Nicodemus Jews" who pursued secrecy. When, for example, a few of the latter wished to become 'secret members' behind the scenes in organizations and activities of the 'open' believers, those who were already openly known refused to accept them as crypto-believers. On the contrary, the 'Nicodemus Jews' were challenged as cowards and distorters of the true witness in the Land.

No one can deny the fact that there exist cases when those who openly declared themselves as JBY have also faced difficulties and even persecutions. However, in retrospect, we may conclude that the fears of the 'Nicodemus Jews' in Eretz-Israel have been exaggerated and not fully justified by reality. Those who have

faced the problems would support this conclusion.

7. "Zion" - Necessarily in Eretz-Israel?

Although JBY already lived as citizens in the Land of Israel, not all of them were 'Zionists' in the sense of believing in the contemporary national renaissance of the Jewish people in ONE territorial Homeland - Zion. Most of them indeed expected to see secular and political Zionism functioning as a vessel in God's special plan to draw His people out of the Diaspora and bring them back to Eretz-Israel. Such expectations were rooted, of course, in Old Testament prophecies.

Others, however, like Abram Poljak, Albert von Springer and Agnes Waldstein enthusiastically started out with a clear message that it was ONLY in Eretz-Israel that the solution for the 'Jewish question' could be found. Yet after a time, during which they tried to settle in the Land, the difficulties here and the temptations to settle abroad overcame them. They then started to argue that 'Zion' was not necessarily limited to one specific area. They rationalized that 'Zion' was only a name, an ideal carrying within itself a spiritual message that could have moved to any place on earth, and was not necessarily limited to Eretz-Israel.

Following this line of thought, Poljak and his friends ended up by establishing communal settlements called 'Zion' in England, in Germany and in Switzerland. The focal activities of these new Diaspora 'Zion' settlements were targeted at developing ecumenical dialogue and cooperation between Gentile Christians and Jews who believe in Yeshua. For such people, therefore, 'Zion' was no longer a uniquely designated territory, but represented the focus of a new message only indirectly connected to 'Biblical Zionism', and implemented wherever believers desired.

Among those JBY who were close to this pseudo-Zionist approach, were about 100 JBY, who were willing to be evacuated

from Eretz-Israel in the Spring of 1948, on the eve of the founding of the State of Israel. They justified this flight because they anticipated that only problems and persecutions would face them within an exclusively Jewish State and society. Actually, they had no specific Messianic Jewish vision for a unique spiritual revival in the Land of Israel. On the contrary, their argument was that, as JBY, they could live and worship anywhere in the world. They had no specific corporate calling to remain in the Land, and to become an integral part of it.

On the other hand, there existed another leadership in the Land, which may be called the Messianic Patriotic Camp. They strongly supported the vision that the end-times are near, and that God is fulfilling His promise for a final ingathering of His people into the land of Israel from the four corners of the earth.

Actually, from the end of the 19th century we already find JBY like Rev. Ben-Oliel, Herman Friedlander and Ben-Zion Friedman who actively supported Jewish colonization endeavors in the Land. We would mention also the particular involvement of JBY in attempts to establish unique settlements managed by themselves: in "Hartuv" near Beit-Shemesh, in the Jericho area,² and in "Mozza" in the Judean Hills near Jerusalem. These three efforts, however, were unsuccessful and did not last long.

An additional attempt was placed on the agenda of JBY in the 1930's, initiated by the "International Hebrew Christian Alliance" (=IHCA). The IHCA, through its President, Sir Leon Levison, planned to establish a unique "Hebrew Christian Colony" near Gaza, where 2000 dunams(!) were purchased for this purpose. During the whole planning process the local "Hebrew Christian Alliance of Palestine" was also consulted; but because of legal problems with the contract, the project could not be consummated.³ Actually, there was also another option to purchase Land near Acre (Akko) discussed, but this

failed as well.

Notwithstanding five failed attempts to establish colonies of JBY in Hartuv, Jericho, Mozza, Gaza and Acre, and the frustrations they caused, we still may conclude that the prophetic motives of many of the initiators were very strong. In other words, throughout the past century there were idealistic JBY who participated practically in the process of Jewish restoration and colonization in the Land. By trying to establish their own settlements, they labored to present a Messianic Jewish alternative to the dominant prototype of secular Zionism.

Throughout the period under discussion we find other prominent JBY leaders in Eretz-Israel, such as Morris (Moshe) Sigel, Shabtai Rohold, Hayim Haimoff and Shlomo Ostrovsky, who strongly supported and encouraged Herzlian Zionism. They saw it as an obvious PRELIMINARY stage preparing the way for the spiritual revival of the people of Israel in their own Land.

It does not mean, however, that they blindly supported all aspects of political Zionism. They prophetically understood that the developments in the Land were not just coincidence. At the very same time, they saw events pointing to the time approaching when Israel would recognize and accept Yeshua "whom they have pierced" upon His return to Jerusalem. For such outstanding forerunners, it was also crystal clear that the Second coming of Yeshua would also inaugurate the messianic millennial kingdom from Zion.

8. Summary

We have to remind ourselves that in this panoramic survey we have not related specifically to the immense developments that have marked the history of JBY in the Land beginning with the establishment of the State of Israel and continuing until today. We shall need much more time and space to do so.⁴ Nevertheless, the very fact that we now have solid and growing second, third and fourth generations of Messianic Jews in the Land does speak for

itself.

A study of the history of JBY in Eretz-Israel clearly reveals that, through its many aspects, prophecy and history are strongly correlated. The ingathering of the Jews into the Land in unprecedented numbers, including the growing presence of JBY, was and still is attracting much attention. In fact, it is radiating outward to the world, to both Jews and Gentiles. In addition, the unprecedented revival of our ancient national language, Hebrew, has given momentum for new tendencies to redefine theologies and traditional Biblical hermeneutics. One very relevant aspect in this area is, for example, the renewed debate concerning the topic of "REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY". The "Messianic Jewish Revolution" is also affecting both ecclesiastical and rabbinical circles in Israel and in Christendom. Great things are yet ahead of us.

Notes

1. Hyman Jacobs, Religion and Nationality, Jerusalem, August 1927, p.21. cf. Kurt Hjemdal, "Arne Jonsen - A Pioneer in Israel, 1924-1929", Mishkan, #20, 1994: 34-43. Hjemdal's article still needs important corrigenda and addenda.

2. See: David Pileggi, "The Experiment At Artouf", Mishkan, #12, 1990: 42-54; Kelvin Krombie, "A Real Son of Zion: Ben-Zion Friedman and the Jewish Mission at Safed", *ibid.*, #15, 1991: 27.

3. See: Frederick Levison, Christian And Jew - The Life of Leon Levison (1881-1936), Pentland Press, Edinburgh 1989:168;195;306. cf. articles in: The Hebrew Christian, The Quarterly Magazine of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance, *passim*.

4. As already mentioned, analyzing parallel

developments among Hebrew Catholics in the State of Israel may sharpen our understanding of the issues under discussion. See, for example: Nechama Tec, In The Lion's Den. The Life of Oswald Rufeisen, Oxford U.P., Oxford, 1990.