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The Quarterly Organ of the International Messianic Jewish
(Hebrew Christian) Alliance

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CONTENTS

	Page
A Word from the Editor	67
The Lord Had Other Plans By Nathan Berlijn	68
A Girl from Vienna — Part III By The Revd. E. S. Gabe, B.A., A.R.A.M.	71
Continuity and Change Among Messianic Jews in Eretz-Israel: Before and Following the Establishment of the State of Israel By Gershon Nerel, M.A.	77
Knowing God's Will for your Life By Richard Chaimberlin	84
Courage for Pleasure By David Perry	87
What is the Future of Messianic Language? By Susan Perlman	88
Book Reviews	90

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE AMONG MESSIANIC JEWS IN ERETZ-ISRAEL: BEFORE AND FOLLOWING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

by Gershon Nerel, M.A.

THIS ARTICLE is an English adaptation of a lecture delivered in Hebrew on April 30th, 1993. The discourse was presented by Gershon Nerel on the occasion of the annual "Open Day" at "Ebenezer" Nursing Home at Haifa, Israel.



The topic of this article arises quite naturally when we examine the Messianic Jewish segment within the population of Eretz-Israel, especially during the last three or four generations. In other words, we may ask the following questions: Which characteristics have remained as a continuum since the beginning of the British Mandate in 1917, and may still be regarded as stable factors? On the other hand, what changes and innovations have occurred, and should we see also these as an unfinished development?

My answers to these questions relate to the following issues, which I have analysed as enumerated:

1. *Numbers:* There is no doubt that a significant change has occurred. During the thirty years (1917-1948) of the British Mandate over Palestine we observe a static situation of several dozens of Messianic Jewish believers in Yeshua (Jesus), scattered throughout the Land, altogether, approximately a group of no more than one hundred persons. However, shortly before the Declaration of Independence of the Jewish State in 1948, even this small group almost totally disappeared.

We know of about seventy-five Jews (Hebrew Christians, as they were usually called then) who alongside the evacuation of the British troops and personnel, were almost secretly evacuated from Palestine to Europe and America. Yet, less than half-a-dozen of these Messianic Jewish families — out of a strong Biblical Zionist consciousness — decided to remain in the Land. This decision was taken in spite of the fact that war had already begun between Arabs and Jews. Out of the core of these families the reality that we see today in Israel developed.

In comparison to the numerical situation in Mandatory Palestine, we hear today of a non-statistical estimate of four thousand Messianic Jews scattered all over the country. In this reckoning are included the new immigrants of the last five years, from the former U.S.S.R. and

Ethiopia. This trend is obviously expected to grow, especially with increasing numbers arriving from the Western World too. This demographical growth of Messianic Jews in the Land is five times higher than the proportional growth of Jewish population in the State from 1948. Such significant numerical expansion will no doubt eliminate the traditional Jewish attitude of ignoring Messianic Judaism as a "Non-Event".

2. *Organisational Structure:* From the Ottoman and Mandatory periods until the 1960's, individuals and associations of Messianic Jews were mainly found in the framework of churches and missionary societies, especially those of the British and Americans in the Land. This does not mean that the Messianic Jews had no desire to form their own institutions, especially on a wider national level, rather than on a local level. Thus, for example, we know about the activities of "The Hebrew Christian Alliance of Palestine and the Middle-East", in the 1930's and 1940's. However, since the end of the 1950's and early 1960's we see a clear tendency to form, officially, independent local bodies and congregations of disciples of Yeshua.

These efforts to achieve legal status for the local congregations started with creating corporate entities according to the existing Turkish Laws still effective in the Land until the 1970's. The second step was to become a "Non-Profit Society" (*Amouta*), according to new Israeli legislation. In other words, congregations began to form articles of associations", adding various committee work, with institutions of control machinery and accountability. Very often congregations also began consequently to define their own articles of faith.

This judicial tendency served to catalyse the building and maintenance of autonomous congregations, with the ability to function as legal entities, e.g., buying and selling property, employment of workers, receiving donations with tax deductions, etc.

3. *Mapping:* The quantitative change, with the significant increase in numbers, quite naturally indicates the geographical dispersal of Messianic Jews in the Land. They are no longer located chiefly in the major cities of the country — Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Tiberius and Safed, where the church and missionary centres were situated. These days they are scattered in about forty assemblies and home congregations, from Eilat in the South to Naharia in the North, in Moshavim and Kibbutzim. There is a natural dispersion of the Messianic Jewish population to the periphery of the major towns ("Gush-Dan" in Tel-Aviv area, and the "Kerayot" around Haifa), and actually several congregations function in the same cities.

4. *Language Usage:* In this sphere we find a mixture of continuity and change, with definite inclination to Hebraisation — with growing experience of daily life in the Land. The common language used in worship is usually Hebrew, while even expatriates who join a Messianic Jewish congregation, try to accommodate themselves and learn Hebrew.

However, in regions where there are centres with a high percentage of new immigrants, there is continued use of the "imported" mother-tongue. On the other hand, especially in prayers and hymns, and sometimes also in Bible Studies, the tendency is more and more to use the Hebrew language.



Gershon Nerel with Menahem Benhayim in the Ebenezer Home.

5. *Scripture Usage:* Here too there exists a composite of continuity and change. To the “classical” Hebrew translations of the New-Testament, by Delitzsch and Salkinson, dating from the nineteenth century, there were added various new translations. Two examples are significant:
- Paraphrases of the New Testament, focussing on the Gospels (e.g. “The Way”), and using colloquial Hebrew;
 - New modern translations of the whole New Testament, mainly produced as a result of pressure by new immigrants, originating both from the West and the East.

Again, as people became more acquainted with the language and life routine in the Land, their consciousness steadily grew to use a united text of Scripture, combining Old and New Testaments without separations between them. More and more it was realised that a uniform style of language was essential for such a combination. This awareness was rooted in practical daily use of Scripture, that emphasised the basic unity and interdependence of the two Testaments.

6. *Theology and Liturgy:* In this realm, too, there exists a continuation of variety, deriving from different backgrounds and the personal history of individual believers and congregation leaders. Even in Jewish-Catholic (Hebrew-Catholic) circles, there is no more a monolithic theological stand, as one might expect.

In fact, we find different theologies and contrasting hermeneutics: Protestant and Catholic, Calvinist and Lutheran, Baptist and Adventist, Pentecostal and Charismatic, Anglican and Brethren. But still, there are strong forces functioning towards creating local common ground for all of them. This mainly centers around the text of Hebrew Scripture, serving all denominations as one source of “living water”.

Furthermore, the ideological fragmentation does not necessarily lead to antagonism or polarisation enmity. In liturgy, for example, and especially in hymnology, many newly composed songs, with Scripture verses, serve almost identically most congregations and assemblies.

On the other hand, I do not wish to erase the real division among holders of distinctive theologies. Such differences do exist. However, we should pay attention to strong and conscious aspirations, especially among the younger generation, to return to the roots of discipleship of the first century. This trend to bridge the historical and theological gap of the past two thousand years may be regarded as *inter alia*, a target for itself "to restore the pristine".



On the surface, we may say that there is a trend of so-called "Nomism" — emphasising the Torah (Law of Moses) and its Commandments. It seems to me that sometimes this is mainly an outward change, to project and externalise Jewish identity. But, on this level, there is indeed a more substantial factor, centering in the Feasts of the Torah. With their correlation to the New Testament, the Feasts of the Old Testament receive a new and concrete introduction into daily and seasonal reality.

It should also be said that this "nomistic" change is directed especially towards Jewry and the contents of "inner" Jewish identity. Such a trend does not imply at all hidden aspirations to "Judaise the Gentiles" or, on another level, to serve as a tool to achieve personal salvation. Rather, it is more on the national and functional level.

Connections between individuals and Congregations:

It is well-known that the theological controversies are often simply rooted in personal confrontations. More than once, differences of personal background and style — sometimes even trivial ones — are gradually clothed in quasi-theological argumentation. (This may even be sharper in the "pressure cooker" of a very small country like Israel.)

Therefore, as we face greater numbers of Messianic Jews, and as they are more widely scattered geographically in the Land, we find stronger willingness and demand to initiate encounters among themselves.

We may see various kinds of Messianic meetings, not only on a local congregational level, but also on a national basis: in Feast celebrations (*e.g.* in "Shavuot" — Pentecost); in age groups (*e.g.* youth and elderly conferences), and in "functional" groups (*e.g.* family and soldiers' conferences). In other words, as there is greater social interaction, there is less motivation to fortify oneself in theological fortresses, which actually are built sometimes on unimportant and insignificant differences. On such occasions, believers may also try to bridge misunderstandings relating to biblical interpretation.

There is, therefore, a certain change in the direction of local dialogue between groups belonging to different theological backgrounds, and some people would prefer to define that as a tendency of ecumenism. Perhaps this may be correct from a practical point of view. However, speaking very generally, it seems to me that at least in some areas theological differences are reduced. There is a growing common attention focussing on Scripture itself. This is reflected among those who accept the Scriptural text *per se*, in its literal sense.

For those who basically accept the content of Scripture as the Living Word of God, this concept serves as a strong unifying factor. That may be exemplified as follows: Parents who hold diverse — even opposing — theological positions do agree to send their children to the same conferences and youth camps, as long as they are together with fellow believers in Yeshua.

8. *Open Activity*: Here we find a definite and manifest change. There is a clear transition from a state of almost underground life, sometimes even characterised as suffering from problems of paranoia and schizophrenia, to a new condition of openness and an orientation towards public visibility.

This phenomenon is manifest in the streets as well as in the media: the press, television and radio; even with a willingness to produce a Messianic Jewish *Seder* (Passover Meal) for one of the programmes of the national television.

Witnessing and evangelising are done freely and occasionally organised on a national and institutional level.

Such activities become more and more systematic on a permanent basis. For example: it is almost a tradition to join the annual “Jerusalem March” during the feast of Tabernacles, with colourful banners and with singing alongside other Israeli groups and Societies.

9. *Immigration and Absorption*: There is a strong consciousness to negate the *Gola* — the Jewish Diaspora or Dispersion — as a normative way of life for Messianic Jews in the future. One outcome of this conviction is the common effort to make a possible investment to absorb new immigrants and work for their integration into the veteran Israeli congregations. However, alongside this trend there is full understanding of cases of exclusive assemblies of new immigrants with their own leadership and traditions.

Non-Jewish believers who wish to join a Messianic Jewish Israeli Assembly are cordially welcome without any discrimination. Such a trend is actually increasing — as elsewhere in the world — while on the other hand there is a decrease of Jewish disciples of Yeshua who wish to attend assemblies or churches of non-Jewish Christians. This is a genuine variation in comparison to the past.

10. *Learning and Higher Education (Messianic and other)*: Here we find a clear change that expresses the correlation of the above-mentioned factors, as regards to quantities, contents and frameworks. In the past two decades Messianic schools and colleges, libraries and even new research projects have been launched.

Does that tendency reflect a natural “Supply and Demand” situation? Not necessarily. However, it does reflect the wish of Israeli Messianic Jewish leadership to produce local tools of learning and teaching, in addition to routine Bible studies in the congregations. There is strong awareness of the need to avoid sending local believers to complete their theological training abroad, as it used to be in the past. However, this does not exclude the principle that “in every rule there is an exception”.

There should also be mentioned the proportionally large numbers of Messianic Jews involved in the State “secular” educational systems: professional schools and universities. This education is incorporated into Messianic life both for theoretical and practical purposes, simply to provide tools to earn one’s living. We find, for example, primary and secondary school teachers, and holders of many other skilled professions.

11. *Social and Economic Integration:* Quite naturally Jews wish to integrate themselves into the general Israeli society, and minimising their dependence upon income from expatriate sources. This integration process relates actually to every aspect of daily life, and I wish to mention just some examples:
 - a. Educating children in the State-Schools, keeping them involved in the regular systems of upbringing and letting them be informed by local curricula. The basic idea behind this principle is to avoid Messianic Jewish “schooling ghettos”.
 - b. One direct but consequent outcome of the former paragraph is the civil obligation to go on military service. As soon as Israeli youth graduate from High School, they automatically start their military duty (three years for boys and two years for girls). Messianic Jews do not exclude themselves from this process; but the contrary. Men continue to go on reserve duty until age fifty. In contrast to many ultra-orthodox Jews who avoid military service in the I.D.F., Messianic Jews regard this duty as a natural civil obligation.
 - c. Messianic Jews increasingly involve themselves in private economic enterprises, on a smaller or larger scale; for example: High technology, export and import, tourism, etc.
 - d. Participation in national elections to the *Knesset* (Parliament). It does not mean necessarily active involvement in political life. However, it does manifest a strong civil consciousness, even if it is concluded by voting with a blank ballot.

12. *Generational continuity:* As years and decades are passing (and of course time produces its own effects), there is a slow but constant advancement towards spiritual maturity, both of individuals and of congregations. Personal and collective identities become crystalised and established. No doubt there is a stronger activist identity — in comparison with a sort of passivity and seclusion in former generations. Therefore, it seems that collective self-confidence is also reinforced. Minority perceptions are not necessarily a limiting frustration. On the contrary, it is clearer that Messianic Jews are a vital part in a pluralistic mosaic composed of various “valid” minorities: ethnic, religious, idealogical etc.

Furthermore, there is a breaking off of a situation in which Messianic Jews were a minority within a minority of foreigners in this Land. Messianic Jews are a minority standing by itself: no more an attachment to this or that group of expatriates. Sometimes there is even a feeling of solidarity, reflected in provocative methods of witnessing and evangelism. Anyway, having such an atmosphere, children are raised with less seclusion and feelings of timidity. It is, therefore, more simple and natural to be different and exceptional in society. Thus it is easier to work for generational continuity.

It should also be noticed that there are fewer pressures towards assimilation — nationally or socially speaking. The main reason for that: the trend of autonomisation of Messianic Jewish structures (activities, organisations, families) being the framework for the survival and continuity of generations, from father to son to grandson *etc.* There is less and less pressure for self-belittling in front of others, and there is stronger awareness of self-esteem, which solidifies a corporate call with a clear destiny within the Jewish State.



From experience we know that the second and third generations, following their forbears, do not feel the same enthusiasm and devotion that characterised the first generation that adopted the Messianic faith. Therefore, it is the constant obligation of parents to teach their children the concept of “New Birth”. Every new generation has to be taught anew the same way of personal decision to dedicate itself to become disciples of Yeshua. This spiritual education, accomplished by persistence and repetition, is the absolute responsibility of parents for decades.

This is a key factor for the future and successive generations. Its main battle-field is in fact in the homes on the family grounds.

13. *Eschatology*: Perhaps more than in any generation in the past, there is a strong and widespread comprehension that our generation is the one living in the Last Days. There is growing interest in eschatological prophecies, concentrating on their interpretation. The Scriptures are read alongside the daily newspapers. Television and radio news editions are correlated to biblical end-time chapters.

Here in Eretz-Israel there is the focus of expectation of the Second Advent. This subject appears on the agenda of many Messianic meetings and Bible studies. There is much awareness of the fulfilment of prophecy concerning the spiritual revival of the “dry bones” and Israel ingathered in its Land.

The Millennium, with Messiah’s throne in Jerusalem, and the Messianic Reign for one thousand years upon this earth, is a subject repeatedly discussed.

Concepts like “Remnant”, “Election”, “Vision”, “Covenant”, “Promises” and “Revelation” are seriously connected to biblical exegesis, with strong tendency of contextualisation of prophecies.

14. *Summary*: This is a brief bird’s-eye view of the subject defined in the title of this survey. However, it must be emphasised that we are located here in Israel at the centre of gravity of a long process. This progression of events and ideas is a combination of continuity and change. In my opinion, the factors of change and innovation in the present generation of Messianic Jews are evident not only in comparison to the former three to four previous generations, but in comparison to all generations of “Hebrew Christians” following the second or third centuries of the common era. All these trends create closer linkage between Israeli disciples of Yeshua and the disciples of the New Testament times.

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