

Israel Update
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Education and theological training

At the last meeting of the Kenes Artzi (National Leaders Conference) in February the topic for the discussion was theological education within the Messianic movement in Israel. The national leaders conference meets 4-5 times a year. The topic of the meeting is decided by the planning committee and is either a specific problem that has come up or is chosen as the next in line. At the February meeting five different people presented five different programs of theological training presently being offered in Israel. A quick look at the many new and many young leaders of groups and congregation in Israel only underscores the need and the importance of theological as well as other kind of leadership training within the movement. Among those responsible for the weekly teaching in congregations some have only little training themselves and a systematic way to bring in and provide for new leaders to take over or assist present ones still needs to be encouraged and implemented. I want to believe that the choice of the topic of the February meeting should be seen not just as the next in line but as an indication that training is given priority. There are reasons to believe so although a corporate effort where more leaders come together does not seem to be right around the corner but rather as something still to wish for.

The need has been expressed by many, especially the new leaders themselves. During recent visits by Caspari Center Staff members to some of the congregations in the north they were positively surprised by the interest in study books and other material, but negatively surprised at how little aware many of these groups were of material which has been available for a long time, but not been requested. It underlines how little knowledge there is of other groups or programs, and because this is so how little is being done by way of sharing and learning from the experience of others. Baruch Maoz emphasizes the need for education when he in his December 99 newsletter writes "No less important is the theological and biblical education of our present Elders and Deacons & We must also work harder at formulating and then executing a training program that is worthy of the Lord and of the calling to which these men have been committed." Baruch then mentions plans of setting up a program in cooperation with the Reformed Baptist Missions Service. I am sure that Baruch would welcome members of other than Grace and Truth Congregation, but the fact that this program was not one of the five presented, is an indication of the (lack of) communication and cooperation which exist.

The fact that as many as five different programs of theological training were presented at the leaders conference should be sufficient indication that not only are the needs there and expressed but so are the means. A closer look at the options available confirm this. It leaves us with at least two questions: (1) Why are not more people involved in systematic theological and leadership training. (2) Why the desire to set up yet another program? Before trying to answer we will take a brief look at what is presently available:

1: Israel College of the Bible (ICB) or what used to be called King of King's College - now located off Ben Yehuda in Jerusalem - offers a 4 years BA program both in Hebrew and in English. It has closed down the campus in Jaffa and now operates only out of Jerusalem. Recently they were able to extend their facilities to include yet another class room and remodel their library. They have a few full time and more part time teachers. Especially among the part time teachers

there is a wide spread both with regard to theology and to academic qualification. Apart from traditional Bible college courses this semester they offer a course on Traditional Judaism, and courses in biblical languages (Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic). The total number of students does not exceed 30 and the total number of those enrolled in the BA program is about 10, half doing the program in English and half Hebrew.

2: The other institution to present its program at the leaders conference was The Messianic Midrasha connected - at least by its physical location - with Netivyah Bible Ministries and Roeh Israel congregations. It began offering courses in the early 1990s after attempts to establish a broader based theological training program for the whole movement did not materialize. The Midrasha has always had an emphasis on teaching and maintaining a traditional Jewish identity. With the present administrator, Elazar Brandt, this profile has only been strengthened. Each semester 2-4 courses are offered with a total number of students registering during the course of a year not exceeding 40 half of whom would be Jewish. Many sign up for only one course and many of the courses run over 8 weeks or less. Most the student are related to Roeh Israel congregation or the work of Netivyah. The majority of courses are offered in Hebrew. This semester a Jewish - not Messianic - rabbi is teaching a course on Jewish Ethics. It was hoped more student would sign up for this - only 7 showed up. From time to time courses are offered during the summer depending on teachers available. This summer John McRay (from Wheaton College) will be teaching a course and in the future he hopes to spend longer periods in Israel serving the Messianic body mainly through teaching related to and invited by the Midrasha. He will teach in English.

3. Caspari Center - the third of the older teaching institutions - presented the TELEM (Hebrew for TEE = Theological Education by Extension) program. The program is (almost) as old as Caspari Center (1982) and the number of study books/courses made especially for the program and now available in Hebrew is eleven with two more books on the way. Like the Midrasha the TELEM program does not offer degree courses, nor is it organized into semesters, but courses, generally made up of 12-15 evening lessons, are initiated whenever a group is ready and in the area of the students. The number of students involved in the TELEM program at any given time has been about 25 over the last years. The TEE set-up provides a lot of flexibility. It does not necessarily provide for progression and continuity. A group which has completed one course does not automatic move on to the next. It takes new initiative and new planning to get each course started. Over the last years several of the study books have been translated into Russian and in recognition of the make up of the Messianic movement in the country where up to 40 % are Russian speaking, it has been decided that from now on all publication should be done in Hebrew as well as in Russian.

Apart from TELEM or as a warm up to TELEM Caspari Center has run a course on teaching how to teach a couple of times in Jerusalem and will do so again this spring now in the Netanya area. The reasons for this are: (1) Unfortunately there has not been a lack of TELEM teachers because of the little demand for course, but hopefully there will be. Hopefully the course will find and encourage these new teachers. (2) It is hoped that the course will help more people realize the value of teaching and encourage them to initiate systematic teaching in the congregations apart from what takes place during the weekly meeting on Shabbat.

4. A fourth program, which has not yet been implemented but presented at the meeting by Noam Hendren is called Bible Training Center for Pastors and is also a TEE- like program. It was originally design for Africa by Dennis Moch of Dallas Theological Seminary, who saw the need for this during visits to Africa. It already exists in several languages, including English and Russian and there are plans to have it in Hebrew and Arabic. The target group is congregational leaders who did

not have a chance to attend a Bible college. The ten courses basically equal one year of full time study and instructors should have either completed the course themselves or have two years of Bible college/seminary behind them.

5. The last program presented is a teaching series in English and the presentation was done by David Lazarus

Evaluation of the theological training

Comparing the number of people taking advantage of and benefiting from the teaching offered in different frameworks in Israel, with the resources invested and the need to equip the next generation of leaders a couple of things can be noticed.

1. More people could - and according to what leaders themselves express - should benefit from

what is presently being offered. The capacity and resources invested could serve more students if only the students were there. It is true that study books written in Hebrew or even translated into Hebrew are few but so are the people who read them. The Messianic movement in Israel - although part of the People of the book and living in the Land of the book is still a community that prefers devotional biographies to more solid reading - if they read at all. As long as this is so will not the number of those who devote time to actual study programs remain few?

2. Attempts to coordinate and cooperate within already existing frameworks are being done only to a small degree and not yet with a continuity that will safeguard the future statutes of theological education. Part of the reason is that present institutions still need to find and define their own goals and as long as this has not happened cooperation with others is difficult and can seem threatening. Partly it is due to a very diverse understanding of what kind of education is needed and at what level. The content and aim of what Baruch Maoz hopes to start in cooperation with RBMS will be very different from the program offered by the Midrasha, although both are local, Israeli leaders. Caspari has thought it important to not only teach in Hebrew but also write study book for the Israeli and Hebrew speaking community. The new, locally initiated program TEE will use translated study material and the Midrasha will offer courses in English.

It should be mentioned that Caspari and ICB have offered courses together in the past and are likely to do so again in the future.

3. When yet another teaching institution and yet another program is being launched it reflects the diverse answers leaders give to what the present need is, what theological profile the training courses should have and what the Messianic movement in the country should be like in the future with regard to theology and expressions. I know it is unrealistic but could we think of a theological shopping mall where we allow ourselves to benefit from the others, join the physical and administrative resources, provide more students with mutual inspiration and trust them to sort out their theology and be exposed to the opinions and theology of others.

The Messianic movement in the Media

Although the Israeli media's main interest in religious issues focused on the millennium activities last year and the much hoped or feared for Messianic/Apocalyptic activities, the orthodox press has remained faithful in reporting on missionizing activities and their own combating of the same through out the last year. One of the things done recently but not written about is the

harassment of Kehilat Ohalei Rachamim led by Eithan Schishkoff and Leon Mazin. For several weeks members of anti-mission organizations distributed flyers when people left the Shabbat meeting; they threatened them by taking pictures and finally they slashed about 40 tires of cars parked outside the building. Messianic believers and anti-mission organizations seem to have one problem in common: reporting to the police makes little difference. In his November 99 newsletter Baruch Maoz reports of the debate in the Internal Affairs Committee where the police had suggested that when they have failed to find evidence in cases of bribes and other offenses of which the Yad L Achim have reported it could mean that *no* bribes were offered and that the law was *not* trespassed. Slashing 40 tires should count as trespassing the law but there is no report of any arrested by the police.

In November the popular nationwide TV program *Politica* aired a round table discussion on missionary activities between Messianic Jews and members of the ultra-orthodox community. The anti-missionary organization presented video clips from their files which dealt with the danger and tactics of the missionaries and Messianic Jews. Although the discussion was stormy and did not change the opinion of the orthodox community and much less the anti-missionaries, members of the Messianic community were pleased with the program and felt that they were given fair treatment. It helps to gain sympathy when one of the ultra-orthodox rabbis walks out in the middle of the program - enraged. Of the total one hour program about 20 minutes were devoted to comments from the Messianic believers. Those representing the community were Eitan Kashtan, Yossi Avadiah and Danny Yahav. Following this program and a debate in the Knesset internal affairs on missionary activities and attempts to initiate new legislation against religious freedom Baruch Maoz also appeared on two radio programs.

On December 24, which happened to be Shabbat and therefore the evening for another popular round table program the issue debated was the celebration of the year 2000 with an emphasis on the history of Jesus and Jewish views of Jesus. Those participating were Jewish academics, historians and biblical scholars. Furthermore Ray Pritz from Caspari Center was invited as was the Danish nun Kirsten Pedersen. It is worth mentioning that the producer had placed a Hebrew New Testament on the table in front of all those participating and that some did in fact refer to it during the discussion. The producer closed to program by holding up to the camera a Hebrew New Testament and recommending it to the audience for their reading should they desire to know more about Jesus. Through out the program Jesus was referred to as Yeshu and having expected anything else would have been expecting too much. One of those participating in the discussion was Yadin Roman, a historian and the Chief Editor of *Eretz* magazine. In the latest issue of the magazine in an article called *Blessed are the peacemakers* he also recommends the New Testament and refers to the message of Jesus as one that holds true to this day.

A similar positive presentation of Jesus can be found in other publications using the millennium as the reason to talk about the Jew Jesus now.

The matter which lately has caught the attention both of the media and especially of the Messianic community and of the MAC is the case in which three Ethiopian young women have been asked to leave the country after it has been found out that they are non-Jews *and* members of the Messianic community. They have been in Israel since 1991 but only in 1999 was the decision to revoke their citizenship passed by the ministry of Interior. What will happen in this case still needs to be seen but expulsion could have grave implication for others in the Messianic community if the minister decides that concealing your affiliation with the Messianic movement is making a false declaration.

Related to this issue is the discussion of the status of immigrants that are registered as non-Jews. This number of non-Jewish children under the age of 18 has increased from 12% ten years ago to 35% today. This registration of religious affiliation is done also for students in schools. While one part of society argues there is a need to change immigration laws and stop giving citizenship to non-Jews others are working to cancel the registration of religious affiliation for students. Although this does not directly relate to Messianic believers, indirectly it does.

Locals and Expatriates

To say that the issue of locals and expatriates representing foreign gentile organizations or the issues of who is Jewish and who is not no longer plays any role would be wrong. Only a month ago I heard it said again that had it not been for the influence for expatriates things would be so much better, fewer problems and less division. Pointing out that most congregations and institutions today are run by locals and not by expatriates nor by non-Jews did little to diminish the accusation or critique of foreign involvement. The foreign organizations were still to blame.

The locals-versus-foreign issue has been used by some who do not favor of the latest Mishkan publication of Facts & Myths. It has been said that both authors represent foreign mission organization which accounted for the lack of sensitivity behind the publication. Such a claim disregards the fact that the decision to do the survey and write the book was made by the Mishkan editorial board which has at least two local leaders.

Foreign organizations and expatriates have made wrong decisions and created problems - let there be no doubt. It is always easier to see it when looking at times past. In the future others are going to look at decisions made and projects undertaken by us today and shake their head in dismay. But the accusations against foreign or expatriate involvement (apart from financial) should be questioned. Not to justify any foreigners be they individuals or organizations. But it is much too easy to put the blame there and by doing so local leaders are prevented from or escaping facing some of the issues that they can and should take responsibility for. It is easy to assume that if you are not responsible then you can also not do anything about. But lack of knowledge and appreciation of Jewish/rabbinic traditions and lack of Hebrew language skills within the movement today is not to be blamed on expatriates, only. It is a new, but local challenge.

It is said that the Messianic movement in Israel is prevented from forming and expressing a Jewish/Messianic theology which would help them find their identity as Jews and believers in the Messiah. The reason is that as long as they are financially dependent on evangelical churches they cannot free themselves of an evangelical theology. Knowing how little accountability donors require (and that is a problem of the donors) and how many donors seem fascinated rather than suspicious of Jewishness I find this hard to believe. In all honesty it needs to be said that there *are* who criticize foreigners, individuals or organizations, who take an interest in the welfare of the Messianic movement but fail to raise a critical voice. How can we grow, it is said, if you do not tell us when we go astray.

One of the decisions made by a foreign organization now and questioned by local congregations is the changed policy of the mission board of the Southern Baptist especially with the implication this has for the re-organizing of Baptist Village. This has impact on week-end retreats for congregations and others and on summer camps for children and youth from the Messianic congregations as well as other congregations in the country. The strategy applied by the BCI is to

put all emphasis on evangelism and move away from planting and building congregations. The argument is that as long as there are groups and individuals who have not heard the gospel all BCI resources should go to church planting and evangelism and not to discipleship and congregational development. Perhaps this is missiologically correct (it is for sure the right and responsibility of anybody to decide how they use their resources). Perhaps some - organization and people - have stayed too long in one field and become an institution. But in the implementation of this policy some claim that there is little appreciation of the insight and experience gained over the years and only little desire to provide continuation. It seems ironic that the best collection of publications Hayahad, the magazine published by the BCI for many years, is found in Denmark. When asking for back issues for the Caspari Center library I was told that in moving the office the new people had cleaned out a lot of old boxes and probably thrown them out. At least nobody knew where we could get copies and nobody seemed to think that a mistake was made in the clean-up process.

Messianic Israeli Jews - Palestinian Arab Christians

The reason for the long and - some might say - not very catchy title for this paragraph is to focus the attention on the recent published book *The Bible and the Land: An Encounter*. The subtitle of the book is: *Different views: Messianic Israeli Jews, Palestinian Arab Christians, Western Christians*. Only those who have been involved in a discussion on the terminology and have had to use such terminology in Israel/Palestine today without being offensive or exclusive will appreciate the long title. The book is published by Musalaha and edited by Lisa Loden, Peter Walker and Michael Wood. The articles collected here reflect the work and the discussion of three consultations on the Theology of the Land, the first two held in Cyprus in 1996 and 1997 and the third in Bethlehem in 1998. A fourth consultation was held this February again in Bethlehem and a fifth is scheduled for August of 2001, the location of which is still to be decided.

The consultations have been held with the understanding that the question of whose Land and the politics of the present day are not just issues of political opinions about peace process and social conditions of people living there. Behind the political issues there are theological ones and when both sides claim that they reach their different and conflicting understandings by reading the same Word of God they owe it to themselves and each other to look at the word of God - together. One side understands the present times as being the end-times and specific political events are seen as a confirmation of this. This allows for an end-time theology which gives priority to issues such as prophecies, the role of the remnant over against other issues. For the other side the present situation is characterized by issues of what they experience as social and political injustice. The emphasis of their scripture reading is less on end-time and more on the Christ-event than and the new creation this has brought about.

But there is more to the matter than who has the right wrong with scriptural interpretation. Reconciliation, be it between family members, congregations or congregations members or between peoples, is not an option for believers in the Messiah. It is a mandate and neglecting it has serious repercussions for the spiritual maturity of those involved. In this case for the Messianic Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arab Christians. Even when we are living in the end-times we need to live right with each other. Furthermore, reconciliation is not like a job that one can do and then be done with. Because of what is involved on so many different levels in Israel/ Palestine it is a continued process. Those involved in it seeking to make it happen can testify to this.

Some of the obstacles for reconciliation and for mutual respect to be established are practical issues and seemingly legitimate excuses: Where to meet, who can travel and to where???

It is easier to find excuses than to actually make a meeting or an event happen and most the time the excuses seem justifiable. Unless you really want it, it won't happen.

It is also risky: People get hurt by each other, by what is said, the way in which and the way they are treated. It is easy to be confirmed in one's suspicion of what the other side means and say and leave the meeting or conference disappointed and more opposed to dialogue and mutual respect than before. It is sometimes easier to love the brother whom you have not seen and before you have been confronted with his theological views and opinions about you and what is important to you. In *theory* - people are for reconciliation and mutual respect. But it takes more to make it happen. It needs open minds that can listen. But it also takes open hearts. To quote from the recent book: Cold theology on its own would not do the trick. Doctrine dictated impersonally from a safe castle would not solve the impasse. (p.12)

That people - even mature believers in positions of leadership - hurt and get hurt is confirmed by a recent panel discussion at ICB and following that a long email circulated to many leaders with grave accusations and calling the other part for a poison in the Land. Fortunately it caused others to rise to the occasion and speak out against circulating such letters and the use of such language. In this case it was a Messianic Jew defending the Palestinian Arab brother, who had been accused of being the poison in the land. The Messianic Jew spoke out on behalf of someone whose theology and political stand he did not share and did so over against the accusation made by a Messianic Jewish brother whose theology and politics he was closer to. It serves to show that reconciliation and the expression of unity in faith are not matters of theological and political agreements only. It is not something people do because they have come to like it and find it easy. It is a mandate! And until it happens people remain spiritual crippled and immature.

Of the actual events that do happen should be mentioned meeting between congregations. For practical as well as for other reasons this is easier Jews and Arabs in the Galilee but even there it is important and requires determination to make it happen. Students from ICB and Bethlehem Bible College meet normally once a semester. Because most students at BBC do not have travel permits to go to Jerusalem ICB students travel to Bethlehem.

Musalaha continues to organize desert trips for different age groups, theological conferences and women's retreats. The women's retreat in December 99 was attended by 120 women which is the biggest attendance so far. The evaluation afterwards was very good but it took a lot of work to make it happen and it would be naive to believe that the next one will be easy because of the success. One would think that a good retreat automatically would make organizing the next much easier and that people would not have to be convinced to come. That is not true.

The consultation held in Bethlehem in February and mentioned above was not organized by Musalaha even though Musalaha published papers from the previous consultation. This and the three previous consultations on the theology of the Land have happened thanks very much to Michael Wood from Cyprus and due to his friendship with Joseph Shulam. Participants from the Messianic side so far have also come very much at the personal invitation of Shulam and to a large degree with similar theological viewpoints on the issue. The Palestinians have for the last two consultations been represented by people connected to BBC but when the consultation was in Cyprus also others participated as the papers in the book reflect.

Having sat in on and participated in the last two consultations there have been times when I doubted that such discussions were good and helpful. It seemed at times that the distance grew and the rift deepened. I have also been surprised at how sensitive issues were here, which in other settings would be only a matter of academia. Here they become matters of very personal hopes and grievance, personal investment or personal loss. Terminology is used very differently and the

different use gives room for unfounded suspicion and false accusations. The fact that the consultation *did* take place and both sides *were* there, one day, yes, but also the next three and now have come together for the fourth time is an indication that for some reconciliation has become a mandate. That is very promising. Reading through the articles of the book also gives hope and indicates maturity. Still I have to admit that the signs of hope expressed in the concluding chapter seemed - as I read them - almost too much to hope for: That through this unity others will come to believe, that Jewish and Palestinian believers could put differences aside and unite in shared social and ethical struggles, that confessed wrongs could be the way to healing and new growth for each side. As I admit my doubts I seem to hear it said to me. Oh, you of little faith.

We should continue to work for reconciliation, better relations between locals and expatriates, for a more correct portrayal of the believing community in the media and society and for better theological training. And we should do that never forgetting what a mighty God we serve. He is able to do more than we in our hopes and dreams can ask for.