

New Covenant Jews: Rooted in Am Israel

By Lisa Loden

As Jews who believe in Yeshua the promised Messiah and savior of Israel, what does it mean to be a part of the people – “Am Israel?” What are the implications concerning the meaning and importance of Jewish identity for those who recognize Yeshua as the Messiah and how do these Jews relate to the rest of Am Israel? In this paper, I will offer some reflections from the perspective of a Messianic Jew who lives in the land of Israel.

Since the terminology used in this discussion is open to a wide variety of usages and definitions, clarification of terms is necessary. Due to the nature of language, it is difficult to assign and transfer the nuances of words directly from one language to another. All translators encounter this problem. Language, and the words that are the primary elements of language, change with time and usage. What do we mean by Israel and the people of Israel or Am Israel?

In general, names are important. People are identified by their names and personal identity is often embodied in one’s name. When dealing with biblical material, understanding the significance of names can reveal otherwise obscure or even hidden meanings. The name Israel is an excellent example of this. Israel was the name God gave to Jacob as he was preparing to meet his estranged brother Esau. This event occurred when Jacob encountered “a man” at Peniel. Although the God of Israel is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; it was with Jacob that an unknown “man,” who Jacob later identified as God, struggled and let himself be overcome. The name Israel comes from the root meaning to struggle. Its meaning in the context can imply either that Jacob struggled or that God struggled. In this encounter, both parties struggled. Jacob, one of the patriarchs of Israel, struggled with God and God, or a divine emissary, struggled with Jacob.

To be part of the people of Israel is to be involved in a divine/human struggle. In the encounter between Jacob and the “man,” the divine protagonist, the man, allows himself to be overcome by Jacob. The text does not indicate that he lacked the power to defeat Jacob; only that he did not. The fact that God, or a divine agent, allows himself to be overcome by Jacob is a theologically profound concept. God’s choice of Jacob in itself is difficult to understand. That Jacob was chosen to be the inheritor of the covenantal promises of God to a people yet to be formed, the Jewish people, and to bear the name of Israel is both extraordinary and counterintuitive. Of all the patriarchs, Jacob is the one who is the most flawed. God’s choice of Jacob prefigures his choice of Israel as a people. God’s choosing of Israel is sovereign and is not predicated on Israel’s worthiness. So too God’s choice of Jacob. In both cases, Jacob as the personification of Israel the nation, and Israel as a nation people in the world and before God, the element of mystery and struggle are present.

The history of God’s interactions with Israel is one of ongoing struggle. Israel has yet to fully submit to her God who, in his sovereignty, has chosen not to overwhelm this people

but continues in a struggle with them from Peniel until today. The element of struggle is inherent in and integral to the identity of the Jewish people. Only as individual Jews willingly submit to God does that struggle resolve for them. The people, Am Israel, continue to be engaged in the struggle.

All those who are part of Am Israel share a common spiritual history. Thus, for the Jew who, in Yeshua, has experienced the resolution of his struggle with the God of Israel, his identity issues assume a new configuration. His personal struggle has ceased; but the communal struggle of his people, Am Israel, continues.

There are at least three terms used in scripture to indicate the people of Israel, Am Israel. In chapter 31, Jeremiah uses all three of these terms *goi* (nation), *am* (people) and *zera* (seed or offspring) in the passage on the New Covenant. (Jeremiah 31:31-37). With even a slight knowledge of the Hebrew language, it becomes apparent that the subject of the prophecy is Israel – the nation, the people and the biological descendants of Israel. The New Covenant has many elements from previous covenants made between God and Israel. The newness of the New Covenant is that it is an unconditional divine promise to Israel, establishing God's relationship to Israel on a new basis as a covenant of pure grace. The people are merely the recipients of this covenant that was later activated through the death of Israel's Messiah. Israel's role was, and continues to be, to accept the covenant that God freely gives.

In the main, as the people, their collective choice has been to reject the New Covenant. In contrast to the collective rejection of the New Covenant, throughout history there has been a remnant of individual Jews who have accepted the covenant. By their acceptance, they join the believing remnant of Israel. Being part of Am Israel is predicated on the covenantal relationship between God and the people. The New Covenant remains the primary province of Am Israel. The covenant is not a distant, abstract concept. Rather it is a practical guideline for the working out of relationship.

Identity is formed in relationship. Israel's identity was mandated and brought into being by God himself. His sovereign choice of Israel as differentiated from the nations is the ground upon which Israel was formed. To be a part of Am Israel can only be fully understood in the outworking of the relationship between God and Israel. The relationship is described by the family paradigms of father to child and husband to wife. (Jer. 3:14) These two relationship schemes express the dual nature of what it means to be Am Israel. Linguistically, "Am" is related to the word meaning "with." To be Am Israel includes the sense of being together, with one another and communally together with God.

Being born a Jew, regardless of one's individual personal identity, the individual is by that birth part of a people group who has existed from the time of the exodus from Egypt. This people are the people through whom God has chosen to work in history and it is through them that salvation history is realized. To be part of Am Israel is to share a common ethnic history and spiritual destiny. The bond of a Jew to his people is in no way threatened or dissolved by faith in Yeshua. This identity is contained in the collective

DNA of the people. The New Covenant or Messianic Jew by nature of his shared DNA is enduringly a part of Am Israel. On this level, being part of Am Israel is not a matter of choice. It is a matter of divine decision expressed in terms of biological descent.

However, Jewish identity is more than biological descent. It is also a matter of choice – of affiliation and consent.¹ The discussion concerning faith, ethnicity and identity is recent. Until Christianity, there was no separation between faith and ethnicity. “Separating a belief system as transcending ethnicity, a system that could include all ethnic groups was the new development of Christianity.”²

When a Jew by faith embraces Yeshua, he immediately becomes a member of a new community. This is the community of the body of Messiah that includes in its membership both Jews and non-Jews. This community is accessed by faith, by choice alone, and has no biological component. It is trans-ethnic, trans-gender and trans-cultural. Abraham is the founding father of this community. God’s original intention was that Am Israel would fulfill the destiny of being the people of God and by so doing would be a witness to Him before the other nations who would also come into the light of relationship with the God of Israel.

God created Israel and the nations as distinct, but related, entities that remain so until the end of the age and perhaps beyond. Israel the nation was specifically created by the will of God to fulfill a particular role in relation to God and the other nations. (see Genesis 12) This is what it means to be the chosen people. To this time, the great majority of Jews retain a sense of being the chosen people. This sense of chosenness is intensified for the Messianic Jew. He, being part of Am Israel, has entered into the process of fulfilling the divinely ordained destiny of his people. The culmination of this destiny was to embrace and live out the new covenant, given in perpetuity to Israel in Jeremiah 31.³

The true meaning of being part of Am Israel and indeed the essence of Jewish identity is based in the fact of God’s creation and calling of Israel. This identity is grounded and affirmed in perpetuity in the covenantal relationship between God and Israel – the original covenant made with Abraham, and reaffirmed through the patriarchs and prophets of Israel. Jeremiah is very clear that the new covenant was made with “the house of Israel and Judah.” It is only later that this covenant was expanded to include those who were originally outside the covenants made with Israel.

1 These categories are taken from: Susan A. Glenn, “In the Blood – Consent, Descent, and the Ironies of Jewish Identity.” muse.jhu.edu/journals/jss/summary/v008/8.2glenn.html (accessed 22/05/2011)

2 Dan Juster, “Apostates Heretics, and Sectarians in Messianic Jewish Context,” Hashivenu Forum #11 – January 2009, p.8

³ Jeremiah 31:31-37 (NASB) 31 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, . . . 33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the **house of Israel** after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be **My people**. . . . 35 Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for light by day And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The LORD of hosts is His name: 36 “If this fixed order departs From before Me,” declares the LORD, “Then the **offspring** of Israel also will cease From being a *nation* before Me forever.” 37 Thus says the LORD, “If the heavens above can be measured And the foundations of the earth searched out below, Then I will also cast off all the **offspring** of Israel For all that they have done,” declares the LORD.

At the strictly human level, the issue of identity is complex and multidimensional. Personal and social identity are the primary categories by which identity can be understood. One's personal identity consists of many components. Individual, personal identity can be described as the unique personality configuration or set of characteristics that belong solely to the individual, differentiating him or her from the rest of humanity. Any individual can and does have multiple identity components.

In addition to personal identity is social identity. Social identity is formed by a series of mental processes⁴ – the first is categorization. Categorization is necessary in order to identify, understand and bring order. The second stage is social identification in which group identity is assumed according to the identity of the category of the group one has chosen. This involves behavior and has an emotional component. Group membership gives emotional significance to the one who identifies with the group and one's sense of self esteem is connected to membership status. The third stage is social comparison. After categorization and identification, the next step is to compare one's group to other groups. This is important to understanding intergroup relations. Hostility and competition between groups is in part a function of competing identities.

Both individual and social or communal identity are ordained by God. He created the categories. Although each individual is unique, there are many areas of commonality. Man was not created to live alone or in isolation. A significant aspect of man in the image of God is the issue of relationship and community; reflecting the fact that God Himself is a community made up of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, separate yet one. Inherent in each individual is the God ordained capacity for and necessity of relationship. No one can effectively live exclusively in terms of himself. Israel was created to be a community; holy, separated to be in relationship with her God.

A Jew who has accepted the new covenant has two faith based community identities. He does not need to choose between them. He can embrace both. He is part of Am Israel and part of the body of Messiah, the ecclesia. These identities are not mutually exclusive and can be lived out harmoniously; finding expression in life style and behavior.

Identity is not only personally decided. It is both formed and recognized in relationship to factors outside the individual. Traditionally, Jews have been identified and defined in a number of ways. One of the most significant identifying characteristics of the Jewish people, both as individuals and as a community, is that they decisively do not believe in Yeshua and have rejected the new covenant. However, as previously stated, the Jew who enters into the new covenant through faith in Yeshua does not cease being a part of the Am Israel. His sense of himself as a Jew remains even if he is rejected by his own Jewish community. For those of Am Israel who are outside the new covenant, to be a part of the people of Israel and at the same time believe in Yeshua is an impossibility since they are

⁴ The material in this paragraph is based on social identity theory developed by H. Tajfel and J.C. Turner in Tajfel, H. & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of inter-group behavior. In S. Worchel & L. W. Austin Eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall

mutually exclusive categories. Having accepted the new covenant, a Jew has in effect realized the fullness of his identity.

In sociological terms, the only way for a person to lose their sense of identity is through assimilation or amalgamation. Assimilation involves abandoning the identity markers of the group and amalgamation is effected through successive intermarriage where the ethnicity of the group is gradually diffused to the point of eradication. Since the identity of the New Covenant Messianic Jew as a part of Am Israel is essentially a spiritual, God ordained identity, it is impossible for the Messianic Jew to lose his identification with Am Israel.⁵

Identity is expressed by life style. The communal aspect of the identity of Am Israel in the twenty-first century can be articulated in a variety of ways, not all of them religious. For example, the efforts of secular Zionism and the ensuing establishment of the state of Israel brought legitimization for a secular expression of peoplehood. Being a part of Am Israel was no longer exclusively defined in religious or spiritual terms.

“Zionism was the most fundamental revolution in Jewish life. It substituted a secular self-identity of the Jews as a nation for the traditional and Orthodox self-identity in religious terms. It changed a passive, quietistic and pious hope of the return to Zion into an effective social force, moving millions of people to Israel. It transformed a language relegated to mere religious usage into a modern, secular mode of intercourse of a nation state.”⁶

The secular Israeli Zionist and the Israeli community in general are strongly committed to the survival of the Jewish people. The secular and the Zionist ideology function as a countervailing agent against assimilation. These elements provide a basis for a strong sense of identity with the people of Israel and are important for Israeli Messianic Jews who do not identify with traditional Judaism. Their sense of peoplehood is based on a social bond between people who share a common home, the nation of Israel, and have common history and memories.

A significantly large component of the Israeli Messianic Jew’s identity is tied to his identification with the state of Israel. Being part of Am Israel is expressed in relation to their understanding of the significance of living in the realization of a restored Israel. The Israeli Messianic Jew expresses his identity as part of Am Israel in both secular and religious terms.

Within the Israeli Messianic community, there is a wide spectrum of life styles that express identification as a part of Am Israel. The life styles range from torah observance to secularity. Most, however, choose to express their identity in forms that are traditionally Jewish in varying degrees and at the same time biblical. Public worship is always on Shabbat and the biblical feasts given to Israel are observed. Male children are

⁵ It is fascinating to see the current revival of the sense of Jewish identity among the descendents of the Marrano or converso communities who were forced to abandon their Jewish affiliation in the fifteenth century.

⁶ Avineri, Shlomo, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981, p 13

circumcised and adolescents go through Bar and Bat Mitzva ceremonies. For the majority, these are not matters of doctrine, but rather of practice.

Israeli Messianic Jews are characterized by a commitment to the covenantal dimension of faith in Messiah. This is expressed in an active desire to see and influence the non-believing part of Am Israel to embrace their biblical heritage as the people of God through repentance and return to the God of the fathers through the atoning work of Messiah. Messianic Jews recognize that without the Messiah, their people are outside of the community of faith, the ecclesia. Like the apostle Paul, their heart's desire is to see Am Israel enter into the fulfillment of its destiny as Am Elohim, the people of God.

Identity is complex and being part of the people of Israel is a multifaceted reality. As New Covenant Jews we share in the history and the future of our people Israel. How we understand and express this truth is a colorful mosaic made of many pieces, each unique but ultimately one icon bearing witness to God who created Israel and called her to bear witness to His rule in the heavens and the earth.

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