

AN ETHICAL WINDOW

Framing a Messianic Jewish moral perspective
Rabbi Russ Resnik, 2013 Hashivenu Forum

INTRODUCTION

As Messiah Yeshua is facing the betrayal, suffering, and death of his final days, he pictures for his followers a future day, when he will return to “sit on the throne of his glory,” and judge the nations. To those judged worthy, Messiah will say,

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt 25:31–40¹)

In contrast, the unworthy are those who fail to serve the needy and disadvantaged, thereby failing to serve Messiah himself. These are not welcomed into the kingdom, but sent away “into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41).

Craig Keener writes that those Messiah calls the “members of my family,” or literally, “my brothers,” are his followers, who suffer poverty, rejection, and persecution for his sake, since Yeshua in other contexts calls his followers his brothers and teaches that “one unwittingly treats [him] as one treats his representatives.”² Nevertheless, Yeshua’s story has wider application, and perhaps a wider original intent. In it he calls himself “Son of Man,” a title that evokes Daniel’s vision of one like a son of man who appears before the heavenly throne to receive an everlasting kingdom (7:13-14). In other contexts, however, Yeshua uses “Son of Man” as a synonym for “human being” or “mortal,” or as a circumlocution for “I” or “me.”³ In this sense, the phrase hints at Messiah as representative human being, or “the last Adam” (1 Cor. 15:45; also 15:21f.; Rom. 5:12ff.), the one man who embodies and bears most fully the divine image common to all humankind. Thus, one encounters Messiah as representative human not only within his immediate followers, but also within the hungry, sick, and estranged, whoever they might be. In meeting their needs, Messiah says, we meet him—a foundational principle for our entire ethic.

But Yeshua must turn from this tale of his glorious return to face the more immediate tale of his betrayal and crucifixion. As the Messianic band is on its way to Jerusalem where that tale will reach its climax, Yeshua stops at the house of Shimon the leper.

A woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the *talmidim* saw it, they were angry and said, “Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.” But Yeshua, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” (Matt 26:7–13)

The first story tells us that we meet Yeshua in the poor and downtrodden; the second that we also meet him directly through the outpouring of devotion. As we juxtapose these two stories, we can identify four intersecting truths that form a distinct ethical window—a framework for ethically viewing and acting within the world around us.

Side one: An ethic founded upon Torah.⁴

Torah is the window sill, the strong horizontal on which the sides of the window frame rest. The sill is foundational to the window, as is Torah to all our ethical considerations. Torah, of course, refers primarily to the text of the Five Books of Moses as the narrative of Israel's origins and formation as a people in covenant with Hashem. But Torah also includes the communal development and discussion of this text throughout Jewish history. Torah in this full sense provides the criteria for ethical consideration, which modern ethics, as Alisdair MacIntyre demonstrates throughout *After Virtue*,⁵ fails to find on its own bases. Based on Torah, Yeshua can affirm as axiomatic compassion for the other, especially the disadvantaged other, as well as whole-hearted devotion to himself.

Side two: An ethic of divine encounter.

Torah establishes the obligation to treat others with the highest regard for their dignity and worth, because the other is created in the image of God. Meeting Yeshua in the other, however, takes this a step further. Yeshua, the representative human, is uniquely *the* image of God, and the ethical encounter with the other is an encounter with God. As the same time, as the woman with the alabaster jar makes clear, there remains an encounter with Messiah himself beyond the encounter with Messiah in the other. The promise of this direct encounter frees ethics from mere instrumentality and safeguards their ethical quality.

Side three: An ethic of prophetic marginality.

Yeshua tells us we'll meet him on the margins, within the needy, outcast, and disadvantaged. Furthermore, the devotion of the unnamed woman—herself a marginal figure—is expressed on the margin of Messiah's life and in a manner questioned even by his *talmidim*. In a paper presented at the 2008 Hashivenu Forum, I wrote of our inherent marginality as Jews who give the highest honor to a figure so long rejected or neglected by the rest of the Jewish world, and indeed by the whole world in postmodern times.⁶ This inherent marginality provides a place of prophetic impact; hence my change of terminology to prophetic marginality.

Side four: An ethic of eschatological hope.

The prophet is marginal in this age because he or she bears the perspective of a different age, the age to come, which will be established through Messiah's return. Accordingly, Matthew frames this profound teaching of encounter with Messiah within the drama of Messiah's return. Only at his return will the sheep be distinguished from the goats. Only at his return will the glory that the woman anticipates in her act of devotion to Yeshua be made apparent to all humankind. In the meantime, our ethic will be partial, accommodating the limitations and contradictions of this age, even as it prepares the way for the age to come.

WINDOW AS METAPHOR

This paper will consider each side of this frame in more detail and conclude with a look at one specific ethical issue through this framework. But first we need to consider three implications of the window metaphor itself, which are vital to our entire discussion of ethics.

1. A window is located within a house.

Ethics is a communal enterprise, not primarily an individual one. The Torah that informs our ethic is not primarily a list of rules, but a living, communal tradition. This truth doesn't preclude individual acts of righteousness, including heroic individual action on occasion. The woman with the alabaster jar acted alone, against the backdrop of social disapproval as expressed by Yeshua's talmidim. Yet even this heroic action was informed by Torah as communally understood and interpreted. She was acting out the meaning of "You shall love Hashem your God with all your heart, soul, and substance," and acting within a communal tradition that invited even the outsider to fulfill this commandment.

A window looks out from within a house, a specific community. Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas notes, "there is no such thing as universal 'ethics' but . . . every ethic requires a qualifier." Ethics is not an objective or universal system, but the pursuit of a right way of living, and the rationale for our ethics is "the close identification of what we ought to do with what we want to be as a concrete moral agent."⁷ Our ethical vantage point, then, is specific and particular; in our case, a Jewish house which is also a Messiah Yeshua house. To change the metaphor, we might speak of the story of the Jewish people, with the Yeshua-story as its crowning chapter. Our ethic arises from within that Jewish-Yeshua story and draws upon it for its validation.

2. **A window is worthless until we look out of it.**

A window may be on the wall of the house, but it's no mere wall decoration. A window brings light into the house, and allows us see beyond the house, and seeing, to act. Conversely, a house without windows is incomplete and consigned to darkness. Just as we can't imagine dwelling within a windowless house, we should refuse to imagine a religious tradition or community without proactive ethical engagement or responsibility. Several contemporary Jewish writers emphasize this theme of responsibility. Ira Stone entitles his book on ethical practice, *A Responsible Life*, highlighting "the idea that service to and responsibility for other human beings is the single most important human value."⁸ Jonathan Sacks gives his book, *To Heal a Fractured World*, the subtitle, *The Ethics of Responsibility*, explaining this phrase as "the idea that God invites us to become, in the rabbinic phrase, his 'partners in the work of creation'."⁹

The window impels us to look beyond our own particular room, to face the demands and opportunities of the wider world, and to engage ethically. At the same time, and a fortiori, if our ethic impels us to look beyond our own setting, it also must prevail within our setting. We see "love your neighbor as yourself" as foundational to the entire ethical dimension of Torah. Indeed, our Messiah—very much in line with Jewish thinking throughout the ages—describes "love your neighbor" as inseparable from "love the Lord your God." Both Jewish and Christian ethics eventually develop this mitzvah into a universal principle, but it is founded in the particular. "Love is a phenomenon of particularity," writes Rabbi Stone. "Every human being is a particular human being and every command to love is a particular command to love. Every object of our love is a particular person and every neighbor for whom we are responsible is a particular neighbor."¹⁰

Responsibility, then, is inherently particular and concrete. This quality is captured by the Mussar concept of "bearing the burden of the other,"¹¹ which aligns beautifully with Messianic Jewish ethics: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the Torah of Messiah" (Gal. 6:2). Responsibility for the other may come to include anyone created in God's image, even all of humankind, but it begins with "one another," and bearing the other's burden is necessarily specific and concrete. Our window-house metaphor should not be taken too rigidly then; our gaze through the ethical window will extend far beyond the house itself, but it isn't nearsighted. It includes, indeed, considers first, those within the house, as in the Talmudic dictum, *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh la-zeh*, "All the people of Israel are responsible one for the other" (b. Shavuot 39a).

3. **It's a window, not a box.**

Ethical thinking takes us beyond the listing of rules and precedents, beyond a narrow understanding of halacha. Stone comments, "Mussar is loyal to the law, but vigilantly awake to the demands of the command beyond the law."¹² Rabbi Sacks expands upon this understanding:

There is a danger in a religion like Judaism, with so many clear-cut rules for highly specific situations, that we may forget that there are areas of life which have no rules, only role-models, but which are no less religiously significant for that. One of the great Jewish mystics, Rabbi Leib Saras, used to say that he travelled to Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezeritch, not to learn biblical interpretations, but to see how the Rabbi tied his shoelaces.¹³

At the same time our ethic must remain aware of the specificity and obligation of Torah and not reduce itself to a subjective or impulsive response to various needs and challenges. The four sides of the window are not meant to define all possibilities of ethical behavior, but to help us frame, construe, and respond to ethical questions.

In summary, the window metaphor pictures; 1) an ethic rooted in Jewish communal particularity, which 2) implies responsibility for those both within and beyond that communal setting, and 3) builds on and transcends the rules and objective mores of that community. We will now consider the four sides of this ethical window in more detail, before going on to see how they might frame one specific issue, today's Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

FOUR SIDES OF THE ETHICAL WINDOW

Side one: An ethic founded upon Torah

Recently, the Helsinki Consultation on Jewish Continuity in the Body of Messiah provided an eloquent definition of Torah, which reinforces its significance as the sill of our ethical window:

Torah is both the historical revelation of God to Israel, and Israel's window to the eternity of God; once-for-all transmitted truth, and ever new process of discovery; the fashioner of human institutions, and the secret of the cosmic order; the absoluteness of the Divine Word, and the relativity of its human interpretation; the vulnerable letter of the written text, and its invulnerable spirit; defining mark of Israel's singular path and destiny, and wisdom for all nations of the earth.¹⁴

An ethic based on Torah in this sense cannot be reduced to rules and regulations. Nor is halacha, properly understood, simply a body of rules. MacIntyre contrasts the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment emphasis on rules with the Aristotelian emphasis on virtue or character. In modernity, "Rules become the primary concept of the moral life. Qualities of character then generally come to be prized only because they will lead us to follow the right set of rules."¹⁵ But character isn't to be valued only because it impels one to follow the rules, nor is it formed by rules. Rather, character, or virtue in MacIntyre's terminology, is at the heart of what it means to be human. Virtue is discovered and strengthened not through regulation, but narrative, for

man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. . . . Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources. . . . [T]he telling of stories has a key part in educating us into the virtues.¹⁶

At last year's Hashivenu Forum, Jen Rosner made a similar point about Jewish identity specifically: "it is the corporate reality of the Jewish people that defines the particular identity of each individual Jew. We make sense of our own unique stories within the context of the larger story of the Jewish people; their story is our story in a profoundly determinative sense."¹⁷ The Jewish story is rooted in Torah as the narrative of Israel's origins and formation as a people in covenant with Hashem. We hold this emphasis on narrative in balance with the body of covenantal statutes and requirements that Torah repeatedly affirms. Halacha seeks to extend the story and its covenantal implications into the details of life in whatever time and place the Jewish people find themselves. We might say that it helps each individual Jew find and enact his or her place in the story, providing an objective standard of ethical behavior.

MacIntyre writes that specific virtues are good and worthy because they contribute to the narrative of a good and worthy life.¹⁸ In the same way, the individual mitzvot of Torah must be understood and applied in the context of a whole life. "Maimonides saw that Judaism contains an ethic of virtue, not just a set of rules of behaviour. It is *not just about what we do but also about the kind of person we are called on to become.*"¹⁹ We need story, context, and not only mitzvot and standards, to become the kind of persons we are called on to become.

For Messianic Jews, the grand narrative of Torah reaches its fullness in the story of Yeshua. Our Torah, and the ethical window frame resting upon it, most explicitly includes this story. Indeed, the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Yeshua, understood within and in harmony with Israel's story, becomes the essential narrative for us. Stanley Hauerwas notes that this story "exposes the unwelcome fact that I am a sinner. For without such a narrative the fact and nature of my sin cannot help but remain hidden in self-deception. Only a narrative that helps me place myself as a creature of a gracious God can provide the skills to help me locate my sin as fundamentally infidelity and rebellion."²⁰ Our ethics is not only a body of laws or principles, but also a guide to the sort of persons we are to become, or rather, to our participation in the shared story of our people and the kingdom of God. And only through the redemptive work of Messiah is this participation possible for us as creatures marred by infidelity and rebellion.

Our distinctive Messianic Jewish approach does not eschew halacha, then, but applies it in such a way as to remain "vigilantly awake to the demands of the command beyond the law,"²¹ as Messiah Yeshua demonstrated throughout his life, and called us to emulate with his repeated command, "Follow me." As followers of Messiah Yeshua, we place his summation of Torah at the heart of our ethic:

"Love HaShem your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all your knowledge." This is the greatest and first *mitzvah*. But the second is similar to it: "Love your fellow as yourself." The entire Torah and the Prophets hang on these two *mitzvot*. (Matt. 22:37-40, DHE)

Rav Shaul echoes this summation, as we have seen, in Galatians 6:2: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the Torah of Messiah." As *Jewish* followers of Messiah, we don't hear these verses as supplanting Torah, but as providing a basis for interpreting and applying Torah in its fullness.

Side two: An ethic of divine encounter.

Yeshua's parable of the sheep and the goats defines ethical behavior in terms arising from within Torah, such as aiding the poor and practicing justice, terms reflecting the worth of humans as God's unique creation and bearers of the divine image. The story then goes further to reveal that such behavior brings us directly into the presence of God himself. We might read this parable as a midrash on Genesis 18, which opens with Abraham sitting at the door of his tent—the closest thing he has to a

window—and looking out to see three men standing in need of hospitality. He meets their needs with great generosity and in so doing meets Hashem himself. Like the sheep in Yeshua's tale of his return, Avraham encounters God in the person of the needy other.

Ethics, then, is not just a means of Tikkun Olam, as it's often interpreted within modern Jewry, or of "changing the world" as in the title of James Davison Hunter's critique of contemporary Christian engagement.²² Rather, ethics arises inherently from the narrative of Torah and draws us so deeply into the narrative that we encounter its true goal, Hashem himself. This encounter must be transformative, because as sinful beings we are unable to fulfill the teachings of Torah apart from God's work in us: "Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. . . . Then you shall again obey the Lord, observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today" (Deut. 30:6, 8). Circumcision of the heart is the formation of character, of virtue, "in order that you may live."

Like Avraham, we encounter God in the person of the needy other, but we cannot reduce our encounter with God to that encounter. At times, Stone and Sacks both seem to speak as if responsibility for the other were the sum total of our practice of Torah or worship of Hashem. Thus, Stone writes that "the Infinite Beloved only interrupts the world we actually live in, through the material needs of the other person who stands in for and carries the trace of the Infinite Beloved."²³ Rabbi Sacks reflects a similar reductionism when he says that "religions reach their highest levels when they stop worrying about other people's souls and care, instead, for the needs of their bodies."²⁴ I recently posted on the UMJC leaders' listserv the story of Benjamin, an older Jewish man dying of cancer whom I visited in the nursing home. He had deeply heard the message of Messiah Yeshua and seemed to need reassurance that this message could be part of the Jewish story. We talked about that connection for a while, and then Benjamin suddenly asked if he could be "dipped," referring to immersion in Messiah. I said he could and, after praying together, poured some warm water over his head right there in the hospital bed. As I visited Benjamin in the days that remained to him, he told me that this was the most amazing thing that had ever happened to him, and that I'd changed his life (of 78 years). I couldn't do much at all to meet the needs of his body, as Rabbi Sacks would urge, but I was able, *b'ezrat Hashem*, to do much for his soul.

Thus, we cannot *reduce* the encounter with God to the encounter with the disadvantaged other. Otherwise we might be tempted to see responsibility for the needy other as our sole responsibility before God, and to objectify the other as our only means of approach to God. Perhaps it is for this reason that Matthew includes the story of the woman anointing Messiah Yeshua immediately after the lesson about serving Messiah through serving those in need. Even as we take responsibility for others, there remains a direct devotion to Messiah, as he reminds his followers, "For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me" (Matt. 26:11, citing Deut. 15:4).

Ironically, this divine encounter, which transcends ethics, frees ethics to be more ethical. Abuse and coercion often arise from placing the goal of ethical action as the ultimate goal and thus justifying whatever means might be needed to achieve it. Further, Messiah's instruction to care for the poor, hungry, naked, and alienated doesn't mean we're to do so just to reap a reward. Rather, Messiah is telling us to be alert and on the watch, for the one in need who appears at the door of our tent bears the image of Hashem.

In the Messianic Jewish community we often highlight the compatibility between Yeshua's teachings and Jewish ethics, but, of course, compatibility or even excellence *within* the field of Jewish ethics isn't all we'd expect of Messiah himself, as I discuss in my chapter in the upcoming *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations*.

One of the fruits of the Jewish reclamation of Yeshua is the realization that the ethics of Yeshua are indeed *Jewish* ethics brought to their highest point. Messianic Jewish ethics carries this vital truth a step further, to see Yeshua not just as teaching ethics, but as embodying his ethics to reveal the character of God himself. Indeed, in Yeshua, the God of Israel expresses the very core of all Jewish ethical teaching and provides the model toward which all ethical behavior strives. Yeshua's ethics are *revelatory*, uniquely displaying the character and presence of the God of Israel.²⁵

Since ethics are revelatory, we can't think of them just as the means to improve the lot of disadvantaged people. At the same time, however, we can't limit God's revelatory action to the sphere of our responsibility for the other. Rather, our ethic expresses and is energized by our devotion to the Messiah revealed within it. This devotion is itself a virtue. Hence the unnamed woman who anoints Yeshua's head is virtuous as well as devoted, so that Messiah says, "Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Matt. 26:13).

Our Messianic Jewish ethical window is distinctive in another way. If we are truly awake to the divine encounter that it entails, our response will be like that of Kepha: "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). We respond to the very Jewish emphasis on mitzvot and character with a deep awareness of our need for God's redemptive work within us. "Therefore . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12–13). Just as the deity of Messiah is revealed in his ethical behavior, so it is to be revealed in the behavior that arises from his work in us, as individuals and as a community.

Side three: An ethic of prophetic marginality.

At last year's Hashivenu Forum, Paul Saal spoke of the inherent marginality we experience as Messianic Jews, and also of "the inherent marginality required to live a God centered existence in the present reality."²⁶ In the same forum, Jen Rosner noted that Messianic Jews

inescapably exist somewhere in the boundary space between Judaism and Christianity, and this is not something we should seek to hide or shy away from. I would argue that our acceptance of the liminality of our identity along with its often excruciatingly painful tensions is actually the wellspring of our rich collective life and the crux of the chapter in God's unfolding story that we have been called upon to write.²⁷

In arguing that we are to accept this position rather than to hide or shy away from it, Rosner is hinting at the transition from inherent to prophetic marginality. A stronger verb than "accept" might be in order, though. We can accept our marginality as inherent to following Messiah, or we can affirm and embrace our marginality as a prophetic position. Prophetic marginality takes a step beyond inherent marginality to leverage our place on the margins into a position of truth-bearing and godly influence.

The woman with the alabaster jar, whose marginality is undeniable, takes on a prophetic role as she not only anticipates the death of Messiah when others are still in denial, but also proclaims the holiness and glory of that death through her lavish outpouring of ointment. She reminds us that devotion to Messiah must never be merely instrumental—and the disciples ironically reveal our need for such a reminder with their question, "Why this waste?"

Abraham Joshua Heschel describes the marginality of the biblical prophets:

It is embarrassing to be a prophet. There are so many pretenders, predicting peace and prosperity, offering cheerful words, adding strength to self-reliance, while the prophet predicts disaster, pestilence, agony, and destruction. . . . The prophet is a lonely man. He alienates the wicked as well as the pious, the cynics as well as the believers, the priests and the princes, the judges and the false prophets.²⁸

Heschel opens this description by noting that the role of the biblical prophets reflected the marginalization of God in their day: “God was alone in the world, unknown or discarded.”²⁹ For Messianic Jews this portrayal of God is an amazing *remez* or hint of the marginalized Messiah whom we serve.

The prophet remains above the partisan categories that weaken religious influence in the contemporary world. For example, even though Messianic Jews by definition are committed to tradition and to traditional boundaries, we cannot limit ourselves to the role of religious gatekeepers. Just as we live within the tensions between the Jewish and Christian worlds, so do we live—prophetically—within the tensions between tradition and institution on the one hand and ethical innovation on the other. Likewise, we’re to meet Yeshua within the needy, marginalized, and disadvantaged, but we’re also instructed not to “respect the face of the poor” (Lev. 19:15). Prophetic justice stands above, but not aloof from, the conflict between haves and have-nots, victors and underdogs, which all too readily becomes partisan and politicized, as in the competing victimizations of our days.

In commenting on the story of Yeshua’s anointing, Keener brings out this aspect of prophetic marginality. He notes that the disciples “have the potential to become like the very establishment that was hostile to” Yeshua. He has to correct his disciples because he knows their thoughts, just as “he had to respond to the religious leaders on the same basis” in Matt 22:18.³⁰ Yeshua cites Deuteronomy 15, “the poor you’ll always have with you,” to remedy their utilitarian thinking. Later he promises to return and set all things right, which means that until he returns all things won’t be set right. Ethics, Messiah implies, is not primarily a means to manage and fix the world—which leads to the most unethical behaviors—but a prophetic stance within a world that only God can fix. Hunter rightly speaks of the “dubious assumption that the world, and thus history, can be controlled and managed,” and the “dangerous” logic which follows, that “once we have determined the right course of history, everything is subordinate to it—nearly any action can be justified if it helps to put the society on course and keeps it going in the right direction. . . . By making a certain understanding of the good in society the objective, the source of the good—God himself and the intimacy he offers—becomes nothing more than a tool to be used to achieve that objective.”³¹ Ethics is non-instrumental, not “to change the world” but a response to God who is “fully and faithfully present to us,”³² a response which in turn implies that “we are to pursue others, identify with others, and labor toward the fullness of others through sacrificial love.”³³

Throughout his book, Hunter portrays the difficulty of faith in the late modern world, a difficulty implicit in “the inherent marginality required to live a God centered existence in the present reality,”³⁴ as Rabbi Saal states. Although Saal doesn’t go on to employ the term “prophetic marginality,” the conclusion to his paper serves as an apt conclusion for this section of mine:

Healthy . . . purposeful Jewish communities find their prophetic purpose outside of their own walls as an exilic people shaped by the experience of mistreatment and inhospitality, and strengthened in our own state of neediness. (*Shemot* 22:21) . . . To become meaningful agents of God’s redemptive purposes and communal models of Yeshua’s life we must become willing and available to partner with those who are doing the work of Yeshua, feeding the poor, sheltering the helpless, protecting those who cannot protect themselves and speaking out for those who have no voice. That “there shall be no needy” is also our priestly calling

(*Devarim* 15:4) and must help define the shape of our communal life until *Mashiach* returns. For our calling is our task.³⁵

Side four: An ethic of eschatological hope.

Yeshua portrays the encounter with him through the needy other within a story about his return at the end of the age. It's only at his return that the sheep are distinguished from the goats, only then that the faithful are revealed and rewarded, and the unfaithful judged. In the meantime, the promise of his return inspires our ethical action and also reminds us of its limitations. Our ethics will be partial and accommodating of the realities of this age, as they anticipate the age to come. But the ethics of responsibility would suggest that we are not only to anticipate the age to come, but somehow to contribute to it. If we are partners with Hashem in the work of creation, surely we have a partnership in the new creation. We participate in the kingdom of God that Messiah Yeshua announced at his first appearing and will establish at his return, and which we are to serve in this intervening age.

I spent most of my early sojourn within the Gentile church in its Pentecostal wing, which coupled a healthy anticipation of the return of Messiah with a rejection of any human effort connected to it. Messiah would return as a thief in the night, and we needed to be ready at a moment's notice, but we had no part in bringing it about. Ethics was a matter of personal readiness, not of redemptive impact on an age that was winding down. I was exhorted more than once not to "polish the brass on a sinking ship." Such thinking, I suppose, was a reaction to the nineteenth century optimism that human progress, or Christian progress, would somehow bring about the kingdom of God. But, as so often in doctrinal matters, the truth is found between the extremes. The kingdom will come as God's gift in God's time, but we have a genuine partnership and responsibility in its appearing. A text well-loved within our community supports this viewpoint: Messiah says, "You will not see me again until you say, *Baruch Ha-ba b'shem Adonai*" (Matt. 23:39), implying a human (and Jewish) responsibility to welcome Messiah and the age to come.

In his 2011 Hashivenu Forum paper, Mark Kinzer links such responsibility to the priestly role of the Messianic Jewish community.

Jewish Yeshua-followers perform a priestly service on behalf of their fellow Jews by representing them before God. As a consequence, all Israel retains its sacred status, in hope of the day of redemption when in fullness it will acknowledge its returning Messiah.³⁶

Our priestly service does not produce the age to come, but it provides an inroad or beachhead of the age to come. The prophet, who, as we've seen, stands on the margins of this age, declares a vision of the age to come. The priest, standing also in this age, actually brings a dimension of the age to come into this age through worship and intercession, and thus prepares the way for it. The same reality is evident in the priesthood of all Israel, which enacts the promise and power of the age to come in this age.

For example, Torah's account of the building and maintenance of the tabernacle is also a portrayal of the restored creation. Commentator Nahum Sarna shows how the theme of Shabbat links the account of the tabernacle in Exodus 25–40 with the narrative of creation in Genesis 1. "This explains why the Tabernacle was finally erected 'on the first day of the first month' [Ex. 40:2], which is New Year's day, a powerful symbol of the beginning of the creation of the world, the transformation of chaos into cosmos."³⁷ The tabernacle and the priests who serve it not only symbolize this transformation, they provide a point of new-creation order within the chaos of this age.

Israel's keeping of the *mo'adim* or festivals is another aspect of its priesthood. The *mo'adim* reflect and enact within this age the values of the age to come. Although technically not one of the *mo'adim*, Shabbat introduces their listing in Leviticus 23. Shabbat is a memorial of creation (Ex. 31:17), which

anticipates the day that will be all Shabbat (b.Tamid 33b), when creation will be renewed, and humankind will at last be at rest within it. The festivals that follow in Leviticus 23 partake of this prophetic quality of Shabbat. On Shavuot, for example, the Torah instructs, “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 23:21–22). This instruction had already been given a few chapters earlier, in Leviticus 19:9–10. But now it is made part of the observance of Shavuot as the festival of the grain harvest. The poor have a rightful share in the harvest, even though they have no land of their own, because they too are created as divine image-bearers. In the age to come the image of God will be restored within every human being. Through keeping Shavuot in line with Torah’s instructions, Israel anticipates the conditions of that age, when there will be no more hunger and poverty, and no one will be a stranger, but all will have a share in the abundance of the Lord. Israel’s priestly role in keeping the festivals has ethical impact through the inclusion of the poor and marginalized, an inclusion specified for Shabbat (Ex. 20:10), as well as Shavuot and Sukkot (Deut. 16:11, 14) and reflected in the Jewish practice of Passover until this day.³⁸

Rabbi Kinzer portrays a further priestly role for the Messianic Jewish community among the Jewish people.

As an eschatological priestly remnant, we offer our worship to God through Yeshua in the Spirit. As an eschatological priestly remnant of the Jewish people, we offer worship to God in accordance with the Torah, both as written and as carried in the life of the Jewish people through history. As an eschatological priestly remnant of the Jewish people bound in love also to the *ekklesia* from the nations, we offer worship to God as representatives of the one and holy people of Israel . . .³⁹

As Kinzer notes, it is through Messiah Yeshua that we serve this priestly role. Modern Jewish ethical writers, however, show a certain ambivalence about the messianic hope in general. On the one hand, hope is essential to the entire ethic of responsibility that Sacks, Stone and others advocate. Hope allows us to recognize the brokenness and injustice of the world in which we live and to work to change it, because of the belief that there can or will be a better world, which is the heart of the messianic vision. On the other hand, the rabbis warn that the messianic vision can become passive, leading one to think that “the journey from here to redemption can only be conceived as a single giant leap brought about by God”⁴⁰—so why take up responsibility in this age? Such a warning is not baseless, of course. But messianic hope properly understood is compatible with Torah, and indeed inherent to it, and is essential to a truly ethical approach. Without it, we’ll be reduced to mere utilitarianism, trying to fix the world according to our assessment of right and wrong, which, as the past century has all too abundantly demonstrated, nurtures the cruelest of ideologies.

Messianic Jewish hope is rooted not only in the words of the prophets, which we share with the rest of Judaism, but also in the actualization of those words in the resurrected Messiah. We need to emphasize both the promise of Messiah’s return *and* his resurrection presence in this age. We agree with Rabbi Sacks that we can’t yet say “Messiah has come and the world is saved.”⁴¹ Nor can we accept the Christian pietism of “Messiah has come and *I* am saved.” There is, however, a present reality of salvation, which anticipates the salvation to come. Hauerwas articulates this balanced eschatological perspective: “That God ‘saves’ is not a pietistic claim about my status individually. Salvation is not fundamentally some fresh and compelling insight about my life—though such insight may be included. Rather, the God of Israel and Jesus offers us salvation insofar as we are invited to become citizens of the kingdom and thus to be participants in the history which God is creating.”⁴² This history, told in the grand narrative of Torah, culminates in creation renewed, in the kingdom of God. Messiah’s resurrection launches the kingdom and provides its beachhead into the age in which we live.

We have a part in expanding that beachhead, a part in the grand narrative, through our own stories of justice and hesed.

We can apply Heschel's comment about the prophet to the priest as well, and to the eschatological hope maintained by both: "Others may be satisfied with improvement, the prophets insist upon redemption. . . . The inner history of Israel is a history of waiting for God, of waiting for His arrival. Just as Israel is certain of the reality of the Promised Land, so is she certain of the coming of 'the promised day.'"⁴³ Such certainty fuels our ethic, saves it from absolutism, and establishes it as an eschatological presence in this age.

A WINDOW ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

I recently attended a conference on Israel and the end times, which included some nationally-known speakers plus two prominent Palestinian Christian leaders. One of them, Jack, came recommended by a close mutual friend in Israel, so I arranged to meet him for breakfast before the conference began. Jack was warm and intelligent and we hit it off right away. He gave me a box of fabulous baklava from a favorite Arab bakery in Nazareth, and we talked about family, Scripture, and our own very different spiritual journeys. That evening, at one of the conference sessions, a well-known Christian academic was speaking on Israel's right to the Land. He said God gave the Land to Abraham and told him that its title would be passed on to Isaac, the son of promise, not to Ishmael, the son of unbelief. After my time with Jack, I cringed at that rhetoric and wondered how it struck him. I wanted to run over to him and apologize.

The conference took place right before Rosh Hashanah and I was already reading Genesis 21 and 22 in preparation. In Genesis 21, Abraham must cast Ishmael out of his camp, and yet the narrator of Genesis is clearly sympathetic to Ishmael and his mother, Hagar—as is Hashem himself. Hashem has already blessed Ishmael and promised to make him a great nation (Gen. 17:20), and he now reassures Abraham of this promise. In describing Ishmael as the son of unbelief, the speaker probably had in mind Rav Shaul's midrash on Abraham's two sons in Galatians 4:21 ff., but the reference seemed untrue to the larger biblical picture and more in line with current political discourse and its tactic of invalidating the opposition. It definitely didn't seem appropriate for a conference that featured Arab Christians on the program.

Of course, this is just one example of the irresponsible rhetoric employed on both sides of the question. As another example, we often hear the Land of Israel before the major Jewish return that began in the nineteenth century described as a waste land, abandoned, and empty, as if the presence of a small Arab population through that period was irrelevant or even non-existent. The other side is capable of the same, of course, as is evident in the widespread effort in the Arab world, and now spreading beyond, to deny any historical Jewish connection to the land, or the use of time-worn anti-Semitic stereotypes in speaking out against Israel. Such rhetoric is part of a strategy of competing victimizations, which is dehumanizing and unethical at its core.

Messianic Jewish participation in this debate ought to bring in a new and better perspective, and our ethical window may provide that. As we've seen, the window looks out from Jewish communal particularity to take responsibility for those beyond that communal setting as well as those within. So my cringing at the anti-Ishmael rhetoric, and wondering what my Palestinian counterpart thought of it, was an ethical response, or at least the beginnings of one. I was, at least that evening, bearing the burden of the other. I felt a certain responsibility for him, even though I am—and believe I ethically ought to be—a whole-hearted supporter of the Jewish return to Eretz Yisrael. Indeed, my simple reaction illustrates the meaning of the window as both part of the Jewish house and an opening to the world beyond. The Jewishness of the house supports my stand for Eretz Yisrael as the Jewish

homeland, and indeed establishes it as an ethical position. The window, though, impels me to look beyond Israelis or Jews only. Let's consider, then, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the four-sided framework of this window.

Side one: An ethic founded upon Torah.

Torah depends on the two great commandments to love Hashem whole-heartedly and to love your neighbor as yourself. As we've seen, love your neighbor has been applied within both Jewish and Christian ethics to universal love for your fellow human being, and surely it should apply to those who are literally Israel's neighbors, the Palestinians. We'll consider, though, some other implications of Torah for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Torah includes the land grant to Abraham upon which the Jewish return to Eretz Yisrael is based, and thus is foundational to a defense of Zionism. But such a defense must draw not only upon the land grant and the restoration foretold by the prophets, but also upon principles of justice established in Torah, which apply to Palestinians as well as Israelis. I can't defend Israel's legitimacy by delegitimizing the Palestinians, even though this is a common tactic (in both directions). Nor can I accept the counter argument, made sometimes explicitly and more often implicitly, that the Palestinians have a greater claim on justice because they're in the weaker position relative to Israel.

My new friend Jack was among the organizers of the Christ at the Checkpoint (CatC) conference, which the UMJC, along with the MJAA and IMJA, had publically criticized a few months before we met. I told Jack that, as much as I saw the need for building bridges between the Messianic Jewish and Palestinian Christian communities, I couldn't participate in that conference as long as it kept the Christ at the Checkpoint label, which portrays Israel as the prime obstacle to the "hope in the midst of conflict" that the conference purportedly seeks. The CatC manifesto states, "For Palestinian Christians, the occupation is the core issue of the conflict,"⁴⁴ and the label itself reinforces this reductionist position. At the same time, I'm sympathetic with another statement on the conference website: "Conference organizers challenged the evangelical community to cease looking at the Middle East through the lens of 'end times' prophecy and instead rallied them to join in following Jesus in the prophetic pursuance of justice, peace and reconciliation." Justice would insist on more nuance, however; the "occupation" (to accept that terminology for the moment) is doubtless a core issue of the conflict, but so are the Palestinian positions and actions that have helped to prolong it. Therefore, the evangelical community should cease looking at the Middle East *solely* through the lens of end times prophecy, but should also look through the lens of the weightier matters of Torah—justice and mercy and faith (Matt. 23:23)—which will have ramifications for both sides.

Side two: An ethic of divine encounter.

One of the implications of encountering Yeshua in the ethical other is that how we characterize and speak of the adversary and the adversarial position becomes all-important. We cannot begin to formulate a genuinely ethical response to an issue like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within the polarizing rhetorical framework that is so prevalent today. Richard Harvey, a Messianic Jewish colleague who implicitly disagreed with my decision not to participate in CatC, presented a paper there, "Towards a Messianic Jewish Theology of Reconciliation." As much as I admire Harvey's boldness in participating in the conference despite tremendous criticism, I fear that he naively provided propagandistic fodder for some of the more politically minded among conference organizers. Nevertheless, his paper raises important issues for our community. It speaks of the need for Messianic Jews to engage in discourse with our "Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters," and asks, "How do we distinguish between the agonistic discourses that delegitimise and alienate us from one another, [and] the strategic engagement of discourses that will allow us to formulate options together?"⁴⁵ Doubtless such engagement will be one fruit of recognizing the divine image in those on the other side, realizing that in meeting them I meet Messiah. Surely it

enhances the reputation of Messiah Yeshua when Israeli and Palestinian Yeshua-followers recognize him in each other, as some have done for years, on both sides of this intractable and tragically high-profile conflict. Expanding and building upon this recognition is an ethical imperative for our community.

Side three: An ethic of prophetic marginality.

In seeking a balanced approach that doesn't align fully with either side, we risk marginalization by both sides—but such marginalization would, of course, reflect our prophetic position. Harvey's paper included a survey of Messianic Jewish leaders regarding their perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Harvey noted that “the majority saw a special contribution to be made by Messianic Jews, as a voice from the margins, as a prophetic sign and witness, and as a pioneering means of reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.”⁴⁶ He cites one anonymous respondent who wrote, “Coming from the margins, we should have the freedom to think the situation in new ways, ways that are not colonised by discourses of power, success and probability.”⁴⁷ Sadly, though, current Messianic Jewish discourse on the conflict all too often reflects the same polarization that characterizes political and academic discourse today. This is certainly an ethical responsibility for our community, to rise above the polarization and partisanship of our day and articulate a Kingdom of God alternative.

Side four: An ethic of eschatological hope.

As a Zionist, I support the continuing validity of the land promise to Abraham, and the eschatological hope of its final fulfillment. Ironically, though, eschatological hope in an eventual restoration has contributed to a lack of hope for resolution in this age. Harvey notes that within the Messianic Jewish community, “The clearest theological message to be heard is that of a strong eschatological hope linked to a profound pessimism on any human peace process.”⁴⁸ But eschatological hope has the potential to support a peace process. Because our ultimate hope is focused on the age to come, we can await Israel's full possession of the Land as part of the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21), even though we believe Israel as a people possesses the title deed in full here and now. Until the final restoration, we can support reasonable concessions, if they have genuine potential to advance the cause of peace and, perhaps more urgently, if they can help ameliorate conditions for Palestinians as well as Israelis.

The covenant with Abraham and its expansion under Moses reveals that Israel's full possession of the Land is contingent on its covenant faithfulness to Hashem and its pursuit of justice. Until Israel returns to these commitments, Moses and the Prophets remind us, its possession of the land will be partial and troubled, or even suspended in *galut*.⁴⁹ Therefore the Messianic Jewish community needs to view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a justice issue, with two parties, Israelis and Palestinians, laying claim to justice. That is to say that we need to engage this conflict with ethical nuance, rather than with political or dogmatic rigidity—a simple enough statement, but one that will require moral creativity and courage to put into action. Specifically, I believe that our community has the unique task of replacing the partisanship and polarization that increasingly characterize the day in which we live with a kingdom perspective, not just on Israelis and Palestinians, but on all political and social issues.

CONCLUSION

The ethical window that we have framed implies a responsibility to look beyond our immediate needs and preoccupations, and to engage with the needs and challenges of the world around us. Our communal ethical engagement has been limited in the past, perhaps by the demands of re-establishing a Messianic Jewish community after such long dormancy, but its time has now come. Indeed our community won't be genuinely re-established without it, and I see encouraging signs that younger

Messianic Jews are eager to add their active ethical engagement to the pioneering efforts already in motion.

Messiah Yeshua reminds us that we cannot separate our ethics from our devotion to him. Encountering Messiah, we become responsible for those for whom he himself is responsible: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Our Messianic Jewish window, then, couples an ethic of responsibility with an ethic of divine encounter, but like every metaphor, the window has its limitations. We might imagine ourselves simply gazing out of it, framing and considering our ethics, but not doing ethics. For this limitation the answer is Messiah’s repeated command, “Follow me,” a command that distinctively defines our ethic.

By learning to be followers of Jesus we learn to locate our lives within God’s life, within the journey that comprises his kingdom. . . . [T]he very heart of following the way of God’s kingdom involves nothing less than learning to be like God. We learn to be like God by following the teachings of Jesus and thus learning to be his disciples. . . . That is why [our] ethics is not first of all an ethics of principles, laws, or values, but an ethic that demands we attend to the life of a particular individual—Jesus of Nazareth.⁵⁰

Our window metaphor gives way to the image of following Yeshua, or rather becomes a metaphor for the one we are to follow. The sill of the window is Torah, and Messiah is the living Torah, the one who embodies in himself the instructions of Hashem and the story of Israel through which those instructions are conveyed and fulfilled. One side of the window is divine encounter, ultimately an encounter with Messiah, who is Immanuel, God with us, and who provides the transformation that the encounter demands because of the sin lodged within us. Another side is prophetic marginality, the position of Messiah himself, most fully expressed in his crucifixion, the victory over the powers that dominate our world. The final side is eschatological hope, a hope looking to and preparing for the day when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, and sits upon the throne of his glory to judge the nations in righteousness. May that day come swiftly and soon!

¹ All references from the Apostolic Writings are NRSV, unless otherwise noted.

² Craig Keener. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009) 604–605.

³ Ibid, 65–66. See also, David Flusser with R. Steven Notley. *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 109–113; Geza Vermes. *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 163–168, 188–191. The ambiguity of the “Son of Man” title reflects the mystery of Messiah Yeshua’s identity as Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23).

⁴ In speaking of these four sides, I use the term “ethic” to describe the broad category or ethical thought, with “ethics” as specific applications or the whole body of applications arising from this ethic. I don’t claim to be entirely consistent, however.

⁵ Alisdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Third Edition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

⁶ Russell Resnik. “Hesed and Hospitality: Embracing Our Place on the Margins” in *Kesher: A Journal of Messianic Judaism*, Issue 23, Fall 2009, 1–24.

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas. *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 18.

⁸ Ira F. Stone. *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar* (New York: Aviv Press, 2006) xxii.

⁹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005).

¹⁰ Stone, 100.

¹¹ Ibid, 160, citing Rav Simha Zissel, and throughout the book.

¹² Ibid, 22.

¹³ Sacks, 239.

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- ¹⁴ Helsinki Consultation on Jewish Continuity in the Body of Messiah, Berlin Statement on Torah, July 3, 2012 (<http://www.helsinkiconsultation2012.org/index.php/en/state>, accessed 10/26/2012).
- ¹⁵ MacIntyre, 119.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 216.
- ¹⁷ Jen Rosner. "Messianic Jewish Life Together: Covenant, Commission and Cultural Brokerage," Hashivenu Forum 2012, 8.
- ¹⁸ MacIntyre, 204ff.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 242. Emphasis original.
- ²⁰ Hauerwas, 31.
- ²¹ Stone, 22.
- ²² James Davison Hunter. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- ²³ Stone, 105–106.
- ²⁴ Sacks, 272.
- ²⁵ Russ Resnik, "Messianic Jewish Ethics," in *Introduction to Messianic Judaism: Its Ecclesial Context and Biblical Foundations* (ed. David Rudolph and Joel Willitts; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 82-89.
- ²⁶ Paul L. Saal. "Messianic Jewish Communities by Design: Open Doors and Reserved Seating," Hashivenu Forum 2012, 19.
- ²⁷ Rosner, 13. I imagine that Rosner uses the word "crux" here deliberately, as reminder of the cross. Our marginality reflects the position and character of Messiah Yeshua, demonstrated most clearly in his crucifixion, which Yochanan repeatedly speaks of as being "lifted up" upon the cross, both physically and in exaltation as the divine Messiah.
- ²⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel. *The Prophets: An Introduction. Volume 1* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 17, 18.
- ²⁹ Heschel, 15.
- ³⁰ Keener, 620.
- ³¹ Hunter, 285.
- ³² Hunter, 241.
- ³³ Ibid, 244.
- ³⁴ Saal, 19.
- ³⁵ Saal, 35–36.
- ³⁶ Mark S. Kinzer. "Messianic Jewish Community: Standing and Serving as a Priestly Remnant," Hashivenu Forum 2011, 16.
- ³⁷ Nahum Sarna. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 214.
- ³⁸ This paragraph is adapted from my book *Creation to Completion* (Clarksville, Maryland: Lederer Books, 2006), 118–120.
- ³⁹ Kinzer, 27.
- ⁴⁰ Sacks, 78.
- ⁴¹ Sacks, 13.
- ⁴² Hauerwas, 63.
- ⁴³ Heschel, 181.
- ⁴⁴ <http://www.christatthecheckpoint.com/>, accessed 12/4/2012.
- ⁴⁵ Richard Harvey. *Towards a Messianic Jewish Theology of Reconciliation: The Strategic Engagement of Messianic Jewish Discourse in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (UK: lulu.com, 2012), 31–32.
- ⁴⁶ Harvey, 28.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, fn.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 29.
- ⁴⁹ Exile or diaspora.
- ⁵⁰ Harvey, 75–76.