**Our mission in relation to Israel**

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Yesterday, Mark spoke to us movingly about the saying, ‘There are six hundred thousand letters in the Torah’, which is interpreted as asserting that God’s plenitude can only be revealed in a multiplicity of people and perspectives. Mark quoted Levinas: “It is as if the multiplicity of persons [within the people of Israel] . . . were the condition for the plenitude of ‘absolute truth,’ as if every person, through his [or her] uniqueness, were the guarantee of the revelation of a unique aspect of truth.” C.S. Lewis, my favourite of twentieth-century prophets, said something similar: “If all experienced God in the same way and returned Him an identical worship, the song of the Church triumphant would have no symphony; it would be like an orchestra in which all the instruments played the same note.”

Within Yachad beYeshua, this is an important, positive principle for us. As an organization, we do not see our diversity of standings and callings as an obstacle to fellowship (though it is certainly a *challenge*), but rather as the terrain, almost the condition, of our fellowship. This is not the same as relativism: It is a recognition of levels. We want to encourage and support our members in building deep commitments within particular frameworks – families, home groups, Messianic synagogues, church communities – because we believe that a life of faith and witness is best lived within a community that offers structures of accountability and means of action. As an organization, we do not want to interfere with, much less replace, such particular communities and frameworks, and we do not want to relativize members’ commitments to them. At the same time, we as an organization were born and act out of a deep, shared personal conviction that God’s callings are not identical: that it is possible, even necessary, to acknowledge ways of being a Jewish follower of Jesus that are not our own. We don’t hold this conviction for ideological reasons, or out of an abstract commitment to diversity. We hold it most simply because those of us who are founding members (and I’m sure many who have joined us) have beheld God’s undeniable calling, grace and glory in one another: in contexts and forms where we would not ourselves have sought to find them. The 2018 Congress in Dallas to which Mark referred in the annual meeting yesterday after the seminar was taken up in large part by testimonies: stories of heart-breaking beauty and power, of the ways in which those who were present had been called by God and were carrying out that calling in their lives. Messianic Jews across the spectrum from Rabbinic to free; Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Orthodox. The ways in which they, we, were carrying out their, our, callings were so different, and yet so unmistakably bearing by the same divine imprint, that we had to admit, almost despite ourselves, that we were in the presence of brothers and sisters. We expressed this discovery in a written resolution, which a delegation of us wrote deep into the night on the second-to-last day of the conference, and which the whole group discussed and approved by vote on the last day. I want to quote at some length:

“Inheriting almost a decade of prayer, study, and collaboration by some of our members in the Helsinki Consultation, we are discovering mutual respect, understanding, and affection. We yearn to grow in our common life, to continue to learn from one another, and to support each other’s calling in the Spirit. We believe this is a precious gift from God that should be extended to all our Jewish brothers and sisters who, like us, have come to faith in Yeshua the Messiah. This gift has enabled many of us to overcome the solitude we have felt in our condition as Jewish disciples of Jesus, and we believe our communion with one another can be an instrument of strengthening and faith for all who follow Him.”

We continued: “Without relinquishing our ecclesial communities, we are convinced that Jewish disciples of Yeshua are called to live as a corporate expression of Am Israel within the body of Christ, a prophetic voice within that body and within the Jewish people. We believe that the loss of a Jewish expression of faith in Messiah is a wound within Am Israel and the body of Christ. The healing of this wound calls for the coming together of disciples of Jesus from among the Jews and the nations. This too can inspire disciples from among the nations to increase their efforts to come together with one another in unity. This then will contribute to the fulfillment of the prayer of Jesus that ‘all may be one’.”

The Dallas Resolution (which you can also find on our website) became the founding document of Yachad beYeshua. It marks the fact that Yachad beYeshua was born from two intuitions: one, that we are brothers and sisters, and need to stand together. And two, that the place we are called to stand is that dynamic and tension-filled space between three loves: love of Yeshua, love of Israel (ahavat Yisrael), and love for the church. We are called to hold those loves together, in a myriad of faithful and creative ways.

Our mission statement, which is the subject of this mini-conference, arose from reflection on these founding intuitions, and states: ‘to unite Jewish disciples of Jesus in loving fellowship as a witness to God’s faithfulness to Israel and the Church’. Our main ‘mission’ or vocation as a fellowship is to witness to God’s faithfulness *both* to Israel and to the Church. The first can be hurtful to Jewish Christians within the historic churches; the second can be hurtful to Messianic Jews; but this fellowship stands in that breach, and confesses both.

Today our task is to think about our mission specifically in relation to Israel, to the Jewish people. Tomorrow we’ll be doing the same for the church. Now, our mission in relation to Israel can be understood in two ways: either, specifically, ‘to witness to God’s *faithfulness to the Jewish people*’, or, ‘to witness *before or within the Jewish people* to God’s faithfulness both to them and to the Church’. Both are important. Let us talk a little about the first, before turning briefly to the second.

Within Yachad beYeshua, there is a wide range of understandings of what bearing witness to God’s faithfulness to Israel means. And this means both a wide range of understandings of what it means that God is faithful to Israel; and a wide range of experience of what it means to be a witness. In terms of God’s faithfulness to Israel, we represent the whole range of beliefs: some of us think that God’s covenant with Israel continues to stand alongside his covenant with the Gentile church, in the form in which Jewish life is lived in the Rabbinic dispensation. Some of us think that Jesus represents or sums up in himself all of Israel, and that his body therefore includes the Jewish people, whether or not they are aware of it, because he and they are inextricable. They are hallowed by him and will be drawn as a people and part of his body into his eschatological kingdom. Some of us think that God’s faithfulness to Israel is an eschatological mystery, described in Romans 9-11: that Israel’s rejection of the Messiah (whether it was sinful or justified) in some sense made room for the ingathering of the Gentiles, and that when the full number of Gentiles is gathered in, the eyes of Israel will be opened and they will turn to their Messiah. Some of us think that this is now beginning to happen; others look for its realization at the Second Coming of Jesus. There are also those of us who see God’s faithfulness to Israel primarily in personal terms: in the experience of having been called *as a Jew* to follow our Messiah, who was himself a Jew and does not require us to relinquish that precious identity in following him. For those of us who think mainly in those terms, Yachad beYeshua perhaps presents an opportunity to explore what the implications of that personal faith are for the Jewish people more generally: We don’t prejudge that question, but are here to ask and seek answers together.

I have said both that Yachad beYeshua represents many understandings of God’s faithfulness to Israel and that it represents many understandings of what it means to be a witness. How we each understand the nature of witness is, of course, determined partly by how we each understand God’s faithfulness to Israel: what that faithfulness demands of Israel, and how we can best help our fellow Jews to respond to those demands. The nature of witness is also determined by other things – our personalities, our standing in life, our sphere of action. There is active, vocal witness: standing in a court or another public or private sphere and telling of God’s faithfulness. There is also, and perhaps more often, a kind of witness that lives in our own bodies: *living out* God’s faithfulness to his people. For many of us, this kind of witness is also a witness to an unseen source of strength or grace, which sustains us in hope for the realization of a truth in which we already believe but which is not yet manifest. In the meantime, we bear this unfinished truth in our bodies, holding together within us tensions that are not easily resolved: the tension between God’s election of Israel and Israel’s oppression, or lack of faithfulness; the tension between the often incompatible modes of life of the two corporate bodies to which we belong, Israel and the body of Christ.

This form of witness is especially relevant to the second way in which our topic for today can be construed, namely to witness *before or within the Jewish people* to God’s faithfulness to *both* them and the church. Our two other speakers today will talk about their experiences, and the things they have learned, from long years of such witness.

Within Yachad beYeshua, there are members who represent the full spectrum of convictions about what it means that God is faithful to Israel, and who live out an awe-inspiring range of ways to witness to that faithfulness, and to witness before Israel to his faithfulness to Israel *and* the church. We are a fellowship partly to support each other in these callings and lives, to learn from one another, and to provide constructive challenges to and for each other. And as I said at the beginning, our *primary* mode of witness *as* an organization is this loving fellowship itself: As the psalmist says: “*Hineh ma tov u’ma na’im shevet achim gam yachad.*” And Jesus himself: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13.34-35).

This is in a sense both a starting point and an end point. We can’t pretend to love one another without having in fact lived with each other, talked to each other, challenged each other, learnt from each other. We come with a basic trust that these things are possible, but we have yet to walk the way to which they point. Because ultimately the mission statement is not pragmatic but prophetic: It is a prophecy that a loving fellowship of Jewish disciples of Jesus will stand as a witness to – a living declaration of – God’s faithfulness to Israel and the Church, in the face of both these estranged communities.

By embarking on this journey together, we remember Yeshua’s high-priestly prayer before his Passion: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” (John 17.14-24) We long to see Christ in each other, who is, as the Song of Simeon has it, “a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.” Amen.