

Humble Uncertainty: A Narrower Path to a Greater Hope

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The first time that I encountered the phrase “Jesus saves” was in 1969 when I was 11 years old. It appeared in the form of graffiti spray painted on a railroad trestle over the Arcadia Soda Shop on South Columbus Avenue where my friends and I would hang out after playing basketball. It didn’t take long for another, less religious “artist” to complete the thought with “and Esposito scores on the rebound.” Of course we were all amused by the irreverent hockey reference, though I confess that we didn’t completely understand it. I knew who Esposito was, Phil Esposito, the all-star center for the Boston Bruins. I also knew who Jesus was, Jeffrey Hunter in *King of Kings* a movie that had commanded my attention every time it was on television, and taught me everything I knew of Jesus at that time. And of course I knew that the new graffiti was a play on the word “saves”, but I didn’t fully get the joke. I understood that by appending the hockey reference to “Jesus saves”, Jesus was transformed into a hockey goalie reminiscent of Marv Albert calling a Ranger/Bruins game; every kid from New York would get that. What I didn’t get was why Jesus was saving in the first place, and from what? What did “Jesus saves” possibly mean?

I was already aware, at this very young age that the world was in need of saving. This was a time of turmoil and I was just becoming old enough to be aware of that. It was the height of the Vietnam War and every morning CBS News brought a new body count to our television, while every evening it documented the political unrest over the war.

Living in an apartment building in a neighborhood of apartment buildings assured a high

level of intimacy with our neighbors and a low level of privacy. The entire neighborhood was aware when one of its sons went off to war and even more painfully aware when one didn't come home. It was less than a year since the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and the Chicago Seven trials were still under way. Monthly air raid drills at William H. Holmes Elementary School served as a reminder that even school was not a completely safe place.

But what could Jesus do about any of that? If Jesus was saving anything he was sure taking his sweet time about it. My 11-year-old mind understood that a save was a physical tactile act not unlike Eddie Giacoman kicking a Bobby Orr slapshot away from the goal with his leg pads, or in much grander style the God of Israel splitting the Red Sea so that the Children of Israel could escape the onslaught of Egyptian chariots which were pursuing them. But the Jesus that I had encountered at that young age seemed to be all about ideas, good and irenic, yet impractical ideas. I say impractical not because I was so skeptical that I didn't believe that these could work, but rather almost two millennia of history had demonstrated that Jesus' ideas hadn't yet worked. Even those who followed Jesus met horrible untimely deaths, only they seemed to be ok with it, and even smiled and sang while being devoured by lions (I had also seen *Quo Vadis*, *The Robe* and *Dimitri and the Gladiator* which supplied most of my information on the primitive church). He did perform some miracles, and they did help people, who were sick, hungry and impoverished, but in the end Jesus was executed, and though he was resurrected and cheated death, even that miracle seemed time bound and local, as his work in this world appeared to end from that point on. The world continued to be in such rotten condition

and with few exceptions; even those who claimed Jesus didn't seem to be following his teachings and ideas very closely. Apparently Christians had stopped smiling and singing after the first two centuries because the history of Europe was replete with documentation of confessing Christians killing other Christians, and only when they tired of killing Jews and Muslims. All of this was difficult for an 11 year-old to reconcile with "the meek shall inherit the earth."

In a sincere effort to know I questioned my father about these things each and every time we watched together film portrayals of the life of Jesus. My father was able to give me a "gospel presentation" of sorts, when I asked, albeit in slightly mocking tones. "Son what you need to understand is that it doesn't matter what happens to your body or the rest of this world. Because Jesus' kingdom is in heaven and he has promised a happy life forever to all who believe in him." (This of course is not a verbatim quote but rather to my recollection the substance of our conversations.) My father would also say that he didn't know what happened after death because nobody ever came back from the other side to tell us. I always appreciated the honesty of his agnosticism, even if I did not grasp the root of his cynicism.

As I reflect upon these memories I can recall a small list of questions that challenged me and were at the core of my fascination with Jesus and his affect on the world. Honesty dictates that I mention that I rarely articulated any of these questions since that is not what adolescent Jewish boys do. As a result I most often internalized my queries and can therefore not say with certainty that this is how I might have articulated them. In fact like

most memories these are most probably filtered through a composite of later experiences, thoughts and education. Nonetheless they represent at some level the beginning of a process of investigation that has been a compelling force in the direction of my life and perhaps has parallels for some who are reading this.

First and foremost I wondered why if Jesus was Jewish, how come everybody but Jews seemed to embrace him? (Since my neighborhood was principally Italian and Jewish, and my school was 20% African-American, I rarely thought about other ethnic groups, although I realized the Chinese weren't Christians, thank God, or where would we eat on Christmas Eve.) What was the unlikely possibility that we Jews were so smart that we were the only ones who got this right? Or worse yet could we have been the only ones who got it wrong? If Jesus followers were all Jewish in *King of Kings* and all Christians in *Quo Vadis*, what happened to the plot between Jerusalem and Rome, or did I miss a film in between?

Secondly, if Jesus kingdom "was not of this world," then why did he say, "the meek will inherit the Earth"? Why be born into this world at all? Why spend most of his time teaching social and moral constructs meant to transform the ethos of an otherwise irrelevant locale, all the while recruiting for a better place in the ethers? Oddly enough this seemed to mirror the mass Jewish exodus from the city to the suburbs during my childhood. There appeared to be a real disconnect between God's investment in the world He created and some other kingdom in the Jesus story, yet this better place had no concrete reality that could be described outside its relationship to this world.

Finally, how does one reconcile Jesus teaching, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” with the Church’s history of violence? When and why did Jesus followers abandon martyrdom and take up power politics? And why even bother assuming hegemonic power if they were waiting for the first train out of this world?

I reference this story and some of my early thoughts to help frame, but also to advance this discussion of salvation. In many ways I believe that honesty and humility concerning our uncertainty are necessary components of salvation. Yeshua said, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 18:3) Yeshua of course encourages us to trust in him, yet in context the original hearers are being warned over and over again to be careful of prideful certitude which might block them from the truth which he wishes to convey. Merely knowing and quoting scripture did not appear efficacious since almost all of Yeshua’s interlocutor’s were experts at this enterprise. Rather it appears an honest, awe inspired and inquisitive attitude pleases God more. It is to this end and with this approach that I hope to continue, so it was with my earliest and most child like and underdeveloped queries that I thought best to begin. I have found this the most difficult writing assignment that I have ever undertaken, and I believe it is because the stakes are so great, recognizing that we are evaluating concepts that have compelled our lives for so many years. I take seriously the admonition of Yakov, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). For this reason I am not assuming the position of a teacher since I do not think I have all, or in

fact many answers. I recognize that this is an odd position to hold in a theology forum since the normal mode of operation is to politely establish one owns position as the most plausible, which of course is roughly equivalent to being most probable. This is normally accomplished by validating ones own thoughts and ideas with references and quotes from established thinkers on the prescribed subject. Of course this is only profitable to the degree that all parties engaged agree that the sources are both authoritative and properly understood, something that rarely happens since the enterprise of disputation demands a posture of impenetrable certitude. But since my position is one of admitted uncertainty, I regard the task that I am engaging in to be one of seeking the most valid questions rather than one of asserting the most valid answers. I will likely continue to have few if any footnotes, since most of the thoughts that I have come from my own honest desire to know. Sharing my earliest thoughts on these matters then did not constitute an excessively long introduction, rather a foundation for my own search regarding God's salvific intervention into our world. I believe the questions were and are still legitimate, and remained so long after I inherited an airtight and systematic apologetic from those who "discipled" me in such matters. So I will summarize these three questions as follows though I will not necessarily consider them in this order.

- 1) What about the Jews?
- 2) What about the world?
- 3) What is expected of us?

I am going try to recount other anecdotes from my own experiences, not as a means of proving a position, rather as a way of recalling my own often buried concerns, in a religious system that equated curiosity with immaturity, and not having all the answers with not having faith. I want to share some of the thinking that I have done along the

way, not for the sake of developing a defensible position, rather to stimulate thinking, dialogue, and dare I say to challenge what has become for many of us our most tightly held convictions. In doing so I believe it would be valuable to keep in mind the following proverbial wisdom. *“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings”*. (Proverbs 25:2)

What about the Jews?

I would like to point out that the term to save and all of its derivative forms meant absolutely nothing to me growing up. It belonged to the language of another religious culture, one that I was largely unaware of. Though these words appear in the psalms, and in the prayers in the Siddur, Jews neither spoke of being saved or receiving salvation as either an individual achievement, spiritual ambition, or landmark event in one’s life. It was only at a later time in my life that those who had inherited a particular interpretative tradition filled these hollowed out terms with meaning for me. They strung together a series of recontextualized verses from both the “Old and the New Testaments” and presented me with a highly individualistic, yet coherent plan by which I might be saved. The effectiveness of “the plan’, at least as far as it concerned me, was largely dependent upon my willingness to give verbal ascent to their presentation, which of course was as “biblical” as the verb “save” itself. But what if they were wrong? Is this the only way that the phrases to save, to be saved, or to be the recipient/s of salvation might be understood? If God’s salvation appeared in the Siddur so often why then did it never enter into discussion around the synagogue or in Hebrew school when I was growing up? The answer of course is that it did, but it meant something drastically different than it did

to my Evangelical friends, and was expressed in a completely different idiom avoiding the biblical language that would probably have sounded archaic and divorced from life's present realities.

The references to salvation in the Tanakh and by extension in the Siddur most often were communal rather than individual, and generally referred to God's promises to Israel. The promises of salvation were post-exilic and spoke of covenant renewal and national restoration. Though these promises of salvation were spoken prophetically as a fate accomplished, these were nonetheless contingent upon Israel to fulfill its vocation as the primary intercessor for the world, and to live in obedience to the God whose name it bore, and in accord with the high standards to which He had compelled it.

On those occasions when the Tanakh speaks of the salvation of an individual, this salvation is still every bit as physical and tactile as God's protection of Israel. When the Psalmist, often presumed to be David, speaks of his own resulting salvation; it is from imminent peril, which would certainly result in death, actual physical death. The Tanakh in fact has very little and arguably nothing to say about the fate of the disembodied spirit. The salvation of Israel is then further illustrated through God's active concern for the physical welfare of Israel's paradigmatic king. The life of David and the salvation of his life and kingship are relevant in as much as they are emblematic of Israel's narrative. Like the people he would rule, David's ongoing welfare was dependent upon God's faithfulness and David's obedience. Similarly, when Jonah is saved from his watery peril, his prayer of thanksgiving from the belly of a fish is filled with declarations of God's

salvation that are evocative of David's psalms, tying his story into the greater narrative of Israel. In fact Jonah's recognition of God's deliverance from the watery grave (Jonah 2:2) is a literary allusion to David's declaration of thanksgiving for his own rescue from Sheol (Ps.86: 13). Though this psalm is often understood as a proleptic reference to the resurrection of Yeshua in the Christian meta-narrative, in the most immediate context, and with Jewish eyes this can only be understood to be David and Israel's story, and by extension Jonah and Israel's story. So though the Hebrew scripture did occasion itself to speak of the salvation of individuals, the salvation is only understood within the context of the larger communal story, the story of Israel, a story of deliverance from the present chaos within the created order, not from the created order.

Therefore the Jewish conversation concerning God's saving hand has always been relative to His interaction with the Jewish people. On June 5, 1967 Israel launched a preemptive strike to protect itself against the aggressions of an Egyptian and Syrian led coalition. Civilians were being shelled and Israel was outnumbered both in troops and artillery. I remember a combined high-level angst among the Jewish community within which I lived that I had never seen before. Even among the less religious Jews in my neighborhood there was a palpable concern for Israel and the current situation. At Congregation Emanuel where I attended Hebrew school there were special prayers evoking God's promised protection of Israel at our daily mincha service. The anxiety didn't last long, and when the Six Day War ended on June 10 the entire community seemed to exhale simultaneously. Israel's success was directly attributable to the God of Israel and was recognized by all both in spoken and unspoken agreement; and none

questioned who **saved** the State of Israel and the hope of the Jewish people in the Diaspora.

I would recall this event and the reaction of my community many times since. In 1991, five years after I had come to a definitive faith in Yeshua, I sat in a bible study/prayer meeting a day before Purim. This time it was the United States that was embroiled in a conflict in the Middle East leading a United Nations coalition. Operation Desert Storm had been in effect for over a month following six months of conflict over Iraqi aggression in oil rich Kuwait. Once again though it was the welfare of Israel and its citizenry that was in danger. Iraq in retaliation against the US was launching Scud Missiles at Israeli civilian targets. The leader of our study, a worker with a Jewish mission organization pointed out the interesting (though inaccurate) parallel between Persia in the Purim story and the present conflict with Iraq. I don't know if it was the fact that this was the Persian Gulf War that led him to mistakenly believe that Iraq rather than Iran was the modern day Persia, nonetheless Israel was threatened and we all agreed that it would be highly dramatic, and not unlike God to give Israel victory over its enemies on Purim. Why then were we so surprised when it came to pass? Isn't this what the God of Israel does all throughout history, **save** Israel from its foes?

That God continues to be concerned with the welfare of Israel is a conclusion that most if not all of us have come to. In fact I would dare say that most of us began our search for Yeshua at this very same place. I was captivated by the idea that Yeshua was Jewish. How many jokes had shared the punch line of the underdog Jew pointing out to a smug

Christian that one of our own had gotten promoted to God? What captivated me and I suspect many others is that ironically this was closer to the truth than we might ever have imagined. When I was thirteen Rabbi Blumenthal taught the post-bar mitzvah students at my synagogue. I am sure that I frustrated him with my ongoing curiosity concerning Jesus. It just struck me as odd that among hundreds of “false messiahs” such as Sabbatai Tzvi, Jacob Frank, and Simeon Bar Kochba, only the Nazarene continued to captivate so much of the world’s population. It appeared an injustice or at the least a misappropriation of energy to give any of the others equal treatment to Jesus, who had and continued to influence the world so greatly. We used a history book in class written by Gersh and Levinson that presented Jesus as an average Jew who had no interest in starting a new religion; Paul on the other hand was presented as a religious huckster with mad marketing skills who was responsible for the unfathomable proliferation of Christianity. How did that happen? My thinking mirrored the words of Judas Iscariot in the title song to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, “If you'd come today you could have reached a whole nation. Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.” So how does one reach most of Europe and Asia Minor with the same primitive tools? Apparently something was amiss. At one point I listened to the original cast album of *Superstar* almost daily. It replaced *King of Kings* as my new window into the Jesus world, and I empathized with the confusion and agnosticism of the main characters in the musical. Like Judas I felt conflicted and tortured, Like Mary Magdalene I could say, “I don’t know how to love him.” I wanted to but I was born on the wrong side of the great divide. I wanted to believe it was true but it struck me as odd that God would segregate the world in such an unfair way. To believe in Jesus was a defection of the worse kind and I would be forced to agree that all Jews got

this one wrong. Of course I considered along the way that most of Jesus early followers were Jewish, but they all became Christians, and were absorbed into the massive sea of goyim who would then persecute my people. Obviously no Jews today believed in Jesus. I intuitively knew that if this Jesus stuff were to make sense it would have to be pieced together differently.

The first time I ever encountered Jews who believed in Jesus was in 1974 and I was 16. I was walking in Times Square with some friends and we were trying to score fake ID's. It was impossible back then to walk down 42nd street without someone putting literature in your hand, so I wasn't surprised when I was handed a broadside by a freaky looking guy in jeans and a t-shirt that announce he was a Jew-for Jesus. The tract was cheap and amateurish, just like the pamphlets advertising the strip joints, peep shows and massage parlors that were handed out up and down Times Square. I tossed the broadside without reading it since in that environment it grabbed my adolescent interest far less than the exotic possibilities of the Oasis Health Spa. My first lesson in Evangelism (though I didn't know this was Evangelism) is that fundamental truths of the universe should not be pushed or glad-handed on street corners. Also don't compete with sin on its own terms; it rules its own turf. What is really interesting is that in the coming years as my search for Yeshua intensified, somehow I never made any association between that my quest for truth and the J for J worker I encountered until years after I identified myself as a follower of Yeshua. I suppose my concerns were too deep, and complex to reconcile with such a simplistic, hackneyed and consumerist presentation. I didn't reject it I never considered it. In retrospect I realize that most Jewish people do not reject Yeshua, they

never consider him. He has never been brought into a context in which they might take him, his claims and his role in Jewish history seriously.

Ten years later in 1986 I would place my trust in and give my life to Yeshua. But I can't say I ever had all of my questions answered for me, especially regarding the Jewish people and where their incumbent loyalties should be, with their own or with Jesus. In fact when I came to faith in Yeshua the questions only intensified. I suppose I came to believe because I stopped fighting and "gave up". I was in New York at my mother's synagogue for Yom Kippur. The ark was open and the Chazzan was chanting the kedusha to the holiday nusach. All at once I knew that Yeshua's claims were true and I believed. That was it, no alter call, no sinners prayer, no riveting questions to God in evangelical idiom, and certainly no 'ataboys from the faithful. In fact there was nobody to tell. If the angels were rejoicing they had not let me in on it. I had not thought that day where I was going to spend eternity, that wasn't on the table as far as I was concerned, I had already been in a living hell and I instinctively knew I was being tossed a lifeline. There were circumstances both internal and external that had placed me in a state of continual torment. I will not attempt to express how I felt with platitudinous descriptions; rather I will state that I experienced real peace for the first in a long time. In retrospect, at this seminal moment I was pulled from imminent peril not unlike David or Jonah, and though I may have been the only person in synagogue who was aware of what was happening at that time, I felt indelibly part of Israel's fate. After all it was the God of Israel who met my needs, as I sat in synagogue languishing, crying out for help and deliverance with all of the other Jews in the Fleetwood Synagogue that day and in synagogues all over the

world. In that regard it mattered not whether every Jew was in synagogue, or that every Jew who was, was fully engaged or sincerely repentant. I may have been the only Jew who came to a determination that Yeshua was the Messiah in that place and on that day, but God had not delivered me from Israel, rather with Israel, for Israel, and as a sign to Israel. My salvation was not an ethereal experience divorced from the ethos and pathos of this world or my people, but the beginning of a redemption from the societal ills and a promise of a future redemption of all Israel and all of the created order (Romans 8-11).

As I mentioned previously I did not make a determination of faith in Yeshua due any clever “gospel presentation”. I was not too knowledgeable of Christian constructs and had not been impressed by most of the ones I had been shown. I thought the four spiritual laws were essentially bogus since on investigation they took scripture written to Israel out of context and universalized it as well. Those apologetics based upon fulfilled prophecy would have required me to already believe in Yeshua since so many of them were so tangential. What moved me as always to consider Yeshua was his relationship to the Jewish people. There were two events that encouraged my consideration. One was reading the *Late Great Planet Earth*. Though I would now disagree with much of the material in the book and almost all of its approach to prophecy and eschatology, it was the first time that I had encountered a Christian author who not only acknowledged that Jesus was Jewish, but also recognized the primary place of Israel in the Hebrew Scripture and in the God of Israel’s plans. The second was meeting Christians who not only had a positive attitude toward Jews, but also thought Jews were the chosen people of God and again acknowledged them to be pivotal to God’s plans.

As time passed though I came to realize that even these philo-Semitic positions were limited in scope and hope. Of course they recognized that for the God of Israel to maintain His good reputation for covenantal faithfulness he would have to keep His promises to Israel. Though they acknowledged Israel's rich past and eschatological future, they fell very short of recognizing Israel's covenantal role and purpose in the present. If the Church was the new eschatological reality in which salvation was realized, then to be obedient to God one must "get saved" and become part of the Church. But this created a philosophical dilemma. If "all Israel was to be saved," but all of the faithful in the interim became part of the Church, then who was going to compose the identifiable "all Israel" in the end? In this schema it appeared that Israel was no longer the displaced and irrelevant social entity that it had been in traditional Christian thinking, it had now been upgraded to a farm system for the Church.

I know that to some it will sound as though what I am proposing is a dual covenant system. I have never and will never believe there are two covenants, one for Israel and one for the Church. What I am saying is that the Christian position that we have inherited is inherently a two-covenant system; the old one with Israel that is now obsolete, and a new one with the Church that is up and in working order. I am suggesting a radically different approach. One and only one covenant that was enacted with the patriarchs, ratified with Moses, and enlivened, renewed and enlarged through Yeshua. Rather than a new eschatological reality that replaces Israel, the ekklesia is a new relational reality, whereby those who are in Yeshua, who is the quintessential Israel, are thereby appended

to Israel, and share in the riches of its inheritance in the age to come. This position is only radical because it encourages us to continue the process that we have already begun, and that is to completely reverse the Church's supercession of Israel.

What about the world?

After having my "epiphany" of Yeshua in synagogue on Yom Kippur, I experienced a period of anxiety and fear, so much so that if I not had a genuine existential moment of peace and clarity I would have probably fell away from my new found belief. To say that my beliefs were not built upon a coherent, well-developed system of apologetic would be an understatement. But I could not be talked out of my beliefs, even by myself, since I had never been talked into them, and in fact I am not sure that I fully understood what I believed, let alone how to articulate it. I just knew somehow that Yeshua was the answer, but the answer to what? The situations in the world were not getting any better and nearly two millennia after the coming of Yeshua peace was not in sight. Did the occupants of the planet really need to destroy it so God could start all over?

I was now encountering more Evangelical Christians and several were becoming friends. I would ask my new friends, since they were so much more experienced with these matters to explain what I should expect, and I asked honest questions out of my own experience and accumulated expectations. Wasn't the Messiah supposed to bring peace? If we were his posse shouldn't we work toward and help bring peace, feed the hungry, help house the homeless and care for the victims of injustice? It was explained to me that I need not worry about the state of the world; such concerns were for liberals who were

“trying to earn their way into heaven”. We already “had our tickets out” and were “going to a party soon”. We just needed to tell others so they could pray a sinner’s prayer and go to the party as well. This didn’t make a lot of sense to me on so many levels. First, I had never prayed a sinner’s prayer myself and didn’t even know what one was. This was easily remedied and my friend’s made sure I sealed the deal by holding their hands and repeating a rote prayer to acknowledge that I had received Yeshua. Now I was told I could have “peace in my heart”. I could not shake the creepy feeling I was betraying all of my values, and that all of my new friends were totally narcissistic. Was it really all right to feel ok while the world went to hell in a hand basket? Shouldn’t I shed a tear for all of the innocents who suffered in the interim? Did God really not care about all of the incidental loss and carnage in the interim until Yeshua returned to set things right?

Something was happening to me though; I was overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude to God for delivering my soul from a prison of hopelessness and cynicism that was both self imposed and a product of living in a world of chaos, greed and indifference. The social conscience that I had developed as a boy was returning to me, and I felt both a desire to tell others what I had experienced and a need to help those less fortunate. My friends called this witnessing, but it always seemed as though there was a universe between my desire to tell others what God had done for me, and the mechanical presentations they wanted me to give. I was brought to a set of apologetic classes called *Quest* where I was shown how to present a “hell to shun and a heaven to gain” ideology, both methodically and coherently. I learnt these lessons well but never felt right about them, since they were so far removed from my own quest for God that had led me to Yeshua. My

concerns were all centered on this world and its deplorable condition, their concerns focused on an all important “plan” that was supposedly God’s, but struck me as merely a poor synthesis of bible verses. I wanted to help God save the world; they seemed content to escape it.

I quickly found that I was now living in a world where questions were not really welcomed. Seekers were encouraged to inquire but once you entered the inner-circle and asked questions that challenged the established dogma you were quickly shut-down and given stock responses, and if you dared to persist you might be labeled a trouble maker, or worse yet, considered on your way toward “backsliding”. Apparently caring for the hurting beyond getting them to assent to the “gospel” could call your “salvation” into question. But I still had questions as to what the “good news” actually was. I was told by some, and more than a few, that while I was a neophyte I should read the Gospel of John, and only the gospel of John because it was the clearest presentation of the Good News. Prior to becoming a Yeshua believer I had been told by sympathetic Christians to read the Gospel of Matthew since it was the “most Jewish of the gospels”. I was encouraged by the Jewish genealogies, and comforted by the nature of the inter-Jewish conversation, even if the nature of the conversation was often alien and appeared to me at the time to have some archaic concerns. Even when the disputes recorded in Matthew turned ugly, they were still within the context of a family squabble, and calling someone a hypocrite, a fool, misguided, or even a corrupt snake (Matt. 23:13-36) was no worse than some of the rhetoric I had heard at family circle meetings or on the benches outside of my apartment building growing up; Jews argued. But the Gospel of John, which I had never read, was

quite different. I was unnerved by the disparaging use of the term Jews, as the disenfranchised and dissonant other. Each time I read this referent I internally flinched and wished to protectively cover my face. I heard it elongated in dramatic distain, Jeeews. It was not hard to imagine the word coming out of the mouth of a hooded goon, rather than the benevolent Jewish radical that I had embraced. I found it almost impossible to continue to engage, let alone embrace the words of the “Beloved Disciple”, which seemed filled with vile, and who appeared to need therapy. I could not understand how my newfound friends thought this book was “good news”, or why this would soothe my concerns. Not only did it fail to answer my concerns about the state of the world, Yeshua’s tardiness, and his follower’s lack of interest in such matters, but also I now had all of my old wounds reopened. I was challenged as a caring human, and doubly challenged as a Jewish Yeshua believer. I knew that somehow I was going to need a new reading strategy to reconcile the “Beloved Savior” with the scary gospel of the “Beloved Disciple”.

It was not until decades of consideration, a seminary education, and hundreds of books later that I have been able to come to some peace with the fourth besorah. I still don’t like it much, but I believe I understand it somewhat and how it might exist in the cannon with the synoptic traditions. In the fourth gospel, Yeshua’s discourses propose a much sharper dichotomy, between himself and those who believe in him, on the one hand, and those who are unbelievers on the other, than do the synoptic besorot. This follows a literary pattern of binary opposites, “light” and “darkness”, “eternal life” and “divine wrath”, “from God” and “not from God”, that which is “from above” and that which is “from

below”, “believing” and “not believing”, “accepting” and “not accepting”, “doing good” and “doing evil”, and “loving” and “hating”. The first element of each pair is usually associated with Yeshua, the second with those who reject him. Throughout the fourth *besorah* those who reject Yeshua are labeled *hoi Ioudaioi*, usually translated “the Jews”, but this referent is never used of Yeshua’s disciples, and only twice of Yeshua himself, once by the Samaritan women he engages at the well near Sychar (Yoch. 4:9), and by Pilate who taunts him with the title “King of the Jews” (Yoch. 19:9), and in neither case does he affirm this designation. Didn’t Yeshua and his disciples stay Jewish, or was he truly the founder of a new religion? Since I don’t believe the latter is the case I must assume that *hoi Ioudaioi* must be read without the two-millennia of anti-Jewish and often anti-Semitic freight that has been added to it.

Many explanations and scenarios have been offered from both historical-critical and socio-rhetorical disciplines to diminish the anti-Jewish sting of the referent. It has been explained as both a sectarian term and as a geographical term. In any event its pejorative use in the fourth *besorah* seems to be directed only at the corrupt and hypocritical leadership that oppose Yeshua, never toward the people of Israel as a contiguous whole. Despite the broad plethora of positions, many modern scholars would agree that reading the text outside the historical context of an “inter-family feud” would elicit an incorrect anti-Jewish response, and establish an ongoing contiguous association between the antagonists of Yochanon’s *besorah* and the Jewish people. But even within the context of an inter-Jewish argument, the story of two divergent communities, defining themselves against one another emerges.

This of course is the purpose of Yochanon, to draw a line between those who embrace Yeshua and those who did not. But in light of this I observed an important defining concept, that the fourth besorah speaks of a first generation audience who encountered the Messiah firsthand, and accepted or rejected Yeshua based upon his direct teachings of the kingdom and his embodiment of the divine presence, which brings life and exposes evil deeds (Yoch. 3:16-21). Yeshua never demands assent to creedal formulations rather he invites those who he has encountered to live a life faithful to his teachings of the kingdom. So to apply the insider/outsider bifurcation to those in future generations when they have not had a commensurate opportunity to directly encounter Yeshua seems to redefine the dichotomy that is established in Yochanon's account, and does so in a manner that over emphasizes confession and often under emphasizes obedience. Such an emphasis that has historically been intended to define a discrete identity for the Christian Church has often degenerated into heresiology. This appears, though, to run counter to Yeshua's sensitivities in the fourth besorah toward those who have already been marginalized and disenfranchised by socio-religious rules and conventions. The irony to this is that all too often today it is those who claim the name of Yeshua who over systematize belief and have therefore diminished the nature and the inherent importance of the encounter with the risen Messiah. My friends were far more anxious for me to get with their program than for me to actually find out what the kingdom was. But I did not believe in Yeshua due to any clever argument, construct or presentation, rather because I had encountered the Risen One on Yom Kippur in Fleetwood Synagogue. Denying this encounter was never a viable option.

Ironically, since I have now found a way to embrace the besorah of Yochanon, and identify the ways in which it might be read differently than the three synoptic accounts, I am able to find greater avenues of commonality as well. Though Yeshua speaks of the world hating him (Yoch. 15:18-26), he is not referring to the created order but rather the principalities and power structures that are capable of persecuting him and his disciples. Yeshua is a radical and a revolutionary who exposes the sin of the world order that chooses to dominate others (Yoch. 15:24). He opposes consumerism as a means toward accomplishing the work of his Father in Heaven (Yoch. 2:13-17), provides miraculous healthcare for indigents, never charges tuition and establishes the first recorded free lunch program (Yoch. 6:1-13). I am going to stop short of suggesting that Yeshua was a Jewish socialist, but he certainly seemed to be far more concerned with the plight of the sick, the needy, the helpless and the homeless than my friends seemed to think.

It was the besorah of Matthew and especially the Sermon on the Mount that became the text that compelled me the most. That Yeshua went through the countryside teaching and healing moved me, and the fact that he did it in the synagogues told me he was no outsider. I felt I was getting closer to finding out what the gospel was since Matthew said Yeshua was “preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23). The kingdom was clearly not detached from the reality of a renewed world since Yeshua invested himself so deeply in the healing and restoration of all that was around him. But it was the message of the kingdom and its radicalism that grabbed me.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3-10)*

There was a heaven to be gained, but it appeared to be coming our way. It was not divorced from this world rather those who inherited it were those who followed Yeshua's example of helping, healing and caring. It was the meek, the humble and the peaceable who carried God's favor, not the know-it-alls with an airtight plan. Though the kingdom was a sovereign work we could partner with Yeshua and achieve an inexplicable happiness. Apparently there was work to do and more was required of us than my friends and teachers were either letting on or understood.

I began to volunteer at the soup kitchen at the Thomas Merton House in Bridgeport, CT. Three or four times a week I would go down and help serve meals, organize bible studies, and find housing for homeless men who needed rides to the shelters. Sometimes, though probably ill advised, I would bring people home to sleep on our sofa bed. My wife was uncomfortable with this and rightfully so, but the Good News compelled me to make a difference. Some of my friends were concerned for me, not because I would occasionally put my family and I at risk, rather because they thought I was trying to work my way to

heaven. Some even told me that I was falling away because I was volunteering at a Catholic work, all I knew is that I owed a great debt to Yeshua and I was too glad to try and repay it.

What is expected of us?

My evangelical friends would often question my thinking. They wanted to know how much good work someone needed to do to get in heaven? I wasn't sure. Maybe nothing. That had never been my motivation; I just knew that I was supposed to try to follow Yeshua's example of selfless service. For me the more bothersome question that nobody seemed to want to answer was how much did you need to know, or what did you need to know, or whom did you need to know to get into heaven? There seemed to be a certain level of self-deception in my friends' thinking. According to their model not only was dying clearly advantageous over living, a fact that clearly did not seem to match anyone's genuine desire, but there was a privileging of certain groups of people or types of people who were born with an inside track to the great hereafter. Clearly those of reasonable intelligence had an advantage over those who had sub-par intelligence. Since one had to agree with the gospel presentation, didn't one have to understand the gospel presentation? This left the mentally impaired at a considerable disadvantage, as were children, especially children who were not born to Evangelical Protestant families. Even the hearing and sight-impaired were at a considerable disadvantage prior to advancements in education for the disabled. Yet these are the very people who Yeshua drew to himself. If they were around when he walked the streets would they not have been the recipients of his love and embraced him fully. What of the blind man who could not state whether or

not Yeshua was a sinner but merely replied, “One thing I do know, I was blind and now I see.” (Yochanon 9:25) Would Yeshua have blocked his access to eternal bliss because he could not sort out the whole sin, sinner problem? Those of great intelligence I was told were at considerable disadvantage since they were too proud and their minds stood in the way of their hearts. But intellectuals and those who were the most successful in society were celebrated when they came to faith, indicating that intelligence was of great value only when it was in general agreement with those interpreting the rules of access to heaven.

Having too much or too little intelligence was not the only problem. Much of the rest of the world seemed to have problems with the informational flow. One was at a disadvantage if they had the misfortune to be born into the wrong family, tradition or geographical locale. Of course much of the developing world had not heard of Yeshua, nor had those who were from areas with dominant religious cultures other than Christianity. Even here in the United States I was all too well aware that Jewish people could often not hear the Jesus story as good news when in fact for two millennia it had been nothing but bad news for our people. I did not want to be so arrogant and deceived so as to believe that they would be punished for the failure of those who claimed the name of Yeshua to incarnate his presence, in affect to be his body. The Historical Church had not been a benevolent conduit of Yeshua’s love to Jews and for that matter Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, rather it had been a dominant aggressor that had co-opted and adulterated the image of Jesus until he could only be seen by much of the non-Christian world as a blond haired blue eyed monster. I was told over and again that these were not

true Christians, but this response was overly simplistic, evasive, deceptive and therefore dissatisfying. How was any person to know whether or not they were true Christians? The Crusaders, the Cossacks and the Nazi prison guards all baptized, went to church, took communion and could give assent to the forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ. So how did I know what was in the heart of the person sitting next to me in a Baptist, Pentecostal, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist or Independent Charismatic Church? What would they do if under the wrong circumstances they were asked to round up Jews, or indiscriminately bomb Muslims in a Holy War? Would they then cease to be “true Christians”? What my friends were therefore circuitously declaring was that in fact Yeshua’s followers are as Yeshua’s followers do, a reality that required far more than verbal assent to a few coherent theological constructs. Clearly those who grew up in Anglo-Protestant homes were operating with a clear advantage when it came to accepting this gospel plan. Apart from them, only those who were disaffected from other cultures and religions, all the while having had the good fortune to run into an articulate messenger seemed to receive God’s gift of grace though it was supposed to be for all people (Luke 2:10). Clearly there appeared to be some disconnect between the broadly intended reciprocity of God’s favor, and the limited capacity of this delivery system.

In the circles in which I traveled (and I tried a lot of circles) salvation did not only come down to what you knew and professed, but often how you professed it and amazingly what you thought of others professions of faith. I finally settled into an upstart Messianic Congregation that was being planted by a Jewish Missions group. Out of fear of ostracism by the only other Jewish people I knew who belonged to Yeshua I began

passively, though uncomfortably to adopted the party line. I began to alienate friends and family through misguided “witnessing attempts”, wasted countless hours invested into broadside campaigns, and even subjected my young children to the humiliation of witnessing in public venues. I even knocked on the door Hadassah Lieberman’s home in the Westville section of New Haven and tried to get her to answer a messianized Evangelism Explosion questionnaire. The only thing that exploded was Mrs. Lieberman. All the time though I doubted the efficacy of our methods and the accuracy of our premise. I deeply submerged all of my lifelong questions and succumbed to a world of mindless sycophancy. But the greatest price of all was that I was burying the true peace I had experienced after meeting Yeshua and replacing it with a learned feigned affect, which covered a hardened suspicion of others and myself. If anyone else in the congregation would think outside of the box, or behave outside of the prescribed standards I would question their salvation. I was not necessarily trained to think this way, but it was a natural and common result of living in a world of formulaic grace and calculated expectations.

In 1992 I experienced an unexpected watershed moment. I was attending a bible study led by the leader of this Messianic Congregation. We were studying the book of Luke and I had been observing week after week those within the text who followed Yeshua. They didn’t seem to sign up by virtue of their doctrinal recitation; in fact the only persons within the text who appeared at all doctrinaire were those who opposed Yeshua. So I asked our leader, “I know that we have to believe in Yeshua to be saved, but if someone believes in Yeshua, but does not believe others have to believe in Yeshua, would they be

saved?” He thought about it momentarily, and said “probably not.” I am not suggesting that this one man’s thinking was universal, though I am sure there are many who would agree with him, I was merely observing the world that I was becoming entrenched in. It was a world that demanded absolute certitude, a world where God could only show mercy to those who acted, spoke and even thought in complete conformity with a calculated set of rules. Even hoping for mercy for those who continued to think differently than us could place a person outside the pale. I knew I needed a change. I wanted to regain the peace and the assurance of God’s nearness and protection that I had experienced in the past.

In 1993 I was asked to perform a memorial service in West Hartford, CT. Though, I was living downstate in the New Haven area and attending seminary, I was leading a monthly messianic fellowship in West Hartford that would eventually become Congregation Shuvah Yisrael. A member of Calvary Church where we were meeting contacted me. A business acquaintance of his who was Jewish had just lost his mother, Apparently she had come to believe in Yeshua and wanted a “Christian Rabbi” to perform her memorial service in Connecticut after she was interred in Florida. Though I had never performed a funeral before I agreed to do so. I met with her son and his wife and they only added to my confusion. They went on to explain all about their mother’s interests. They informed me that she was a tarot card reader and a psychic, was a long time member of her shul in Florida, and had within the last several years begun attending a church. If I understood them properly she had not dropped any of her assorted activities but had added Jesus to her spiritual potpourri. I was truly confused. Could someone be saved and be a tarot card

reader? What was I to say about her spiritual destiny; certainly I couldn't argue that she was in process. Of course I would speak of her belief in Yeshua but I didn't know her, what assurance and encouragement could I honestly offer to those who mourned? What I said was this,

It is at these times, when grief is the most poignant, that each of us are compelled to place our faith in the absolute and unfathomable justice of Providence, to place our trust in the immutable and immortal nature of the soul. It has long been the belief and hope of our people, that each person is endowed with a spark of the Divine being. God's protection then, does not cease at the portal of the grave.

Immortality is the lot of all - and the Scriptures declare that reward is meted according to those who in their earthly days do justly, love mercy, and walk in humility with their Maker. Ultimately our hope rests upon the mercy of Dayin HaEmet, the true and righteous Judge.

Though I was attempting to deal with this particular occasion, these words struck me as universally true regarding how little we could actually know of the eternal fate of another. We may know and understand certain universal truths, in the final analysis God is the righteous judge, and He has not asked us to help Him in this vocation. The life He has called us to is rather one of worship and service, both individually and corporately. For each of us eternity begins now and we are to begin to embody the life of Yeshua and of the age to come. This is a difficult vocation that will often require a great price and genuine sacrifice. Our Messiah has asked us to enter into co-crucifixion with him daily (Luke 14:27).

What I am suggesting is that we embrace humility regarding the fate of others and grasp the assurance, which God is offering us in Yeshua. Genuine faith is contagious. The earliest followers of Yeshua almost from the beginning were a unique and as a result a somewhat marginal group. Daily they met in the temple courts and most people feared

them and kept them at arms distance. Nonetheless we are told that their numbers grew daily, evidence that they were effectively working toward the fulfillment of Israel's destiny despite, or better said due to their marginality. It is for this reason that I believe we must be willing to radically rethink our individual lifestyles and priorities, subordinating our individual desires so that we might follow Yeshua as his body. In this respect I am not suggesting a wider hope at all but one that is somewhat narrower. A narrow path for lives well lived as compared to a wide, easy and formulaic affirmation of insider status.

Yeshua's willingness to abandon his kingdom (Phil.2: 3-6) results in its eventual establishment on earth; that those who follow in his footsteps become heirs to the kingdom is equally good news. Yeshua promises that the "Kingdom of Heaven" belongs to the meek, the merciful and the peaceable (Matt 5:1-10). That these will inherit the land suggests again an invasion of the cosmic order into the natural world, a time when the righteous standards of God will overturn the power and principalities that presently dominate this world. Yeshua's humility, sacrifice and suffering are redemptive of the cosmic order; likewise we are instructed to bring his redemptive love into the social and moral structures, forsaking power and self-protectionism. Yeshua instructs his disciples to be happy when they are insulted, while practicing radical generosity and actively pursuing peace. These are meant not merely as individual instruction, but as the representative qualities of a salvific community that bares the image of God in and through His suffering servant. May we endeavor to become that kind of community, humble and honest, embodying Yeshua's life, his teachings and his salvation.