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Communal Aspects of the Besorah

by Carl Kinbar

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Introduction

Abraham Joshua Heschel's *God in Search of Man* is among the foremost works of Jewish theology and spirituality of the past fifty years. Toward the end of the book, Heschel addresses the posture and orientation of the individual Jew within the Jewish community:

... I am moved by an anxiety for the meaning of my existence as a Jew. Yet when I begin to ponder about it, my theme is not the problem of one Jew but of all Jews... It embraces not only the Jews of the present but also those of the past and those of the future, the meaning of Jewish existence in all ages... In this moment we, the living, are Israel. The tasks begun and carried out by the patriarchs and prophets, and carried out by countless Jews of the past, are now entrusted to us... What we do as individuals is a trivial episode, what we attain as Israel causes us to grow into the infinite."¹

Heschel wants to be sure that his readers understand that ours is not a private spirituality, the isolated relationship of one Jew – or any number of individual Jews – with God. Nevertheless, his statement that “What we do as individuals is a trivial episode...” may strike us as harsh. From all accounts, Heschel was an unusually compassionate man. His personal concern and attention to individuals was one of his most notable characteristics. So what can he mean by saying that “What we do as individuals is a trivial episode”?

¹ *God in Search of Man*: New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1955. Pages 420-423 (selected)

Long before Heschel, Shaul of Tarsus wrote these words about his constant state of mind concerning Israel, his fellow Jews:

... I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Messiah for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites... (Rom. 9:2-4)

Who among us has not read this passage and wondered about *our* readiness to dispense with our lives for the sake of our fellow Jews? What inspired Shaul's willingness to be "separated from Messiah," when elsewhere he writes that "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Messiah Yeshua"?² What could be more important than knowing Messiah? Is Shaul confusing ethnic pride with spiritual concern? He continues:

... to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Messiah according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. (Rom 9:4-5)

Certainly Shaul felt a powerful personal solidarity with his fellow Jews, but the strength of that solidarity did not come solely from ethnic affiliation – it arose from Israel's God-given communal treasures and destiny. Shaul's love arose from God's love for Israel. It was so powerful that every moment of every day he would have been willing, were it possible, to sacrifice both himself *and* his ongoing service to God among the Gentiles, for the sake of his fellow Jews. His fate as an individual was less important to him than the fate of Israel.

Shaul and Heschel shared the same fervent sense of communal identity. It is not that the individual is unimportant. Far from it – Shaul and Heschel would agree that the individual human being, made in the image of God, is of indefinably great significance

² Phil. 3:8

and worth. But that individual life is eclipsed by the life and significance of the covenant community.

As Heschel explains it, Jews must not feel and act merely as private individuals or even as individual Jews.

Our attitude to the Bible is more than the problem of isolated individual faith. It is as members of the community of Israel that our ultimate decision must be made. Estranged from the community of Israel and its continuous response, who could understand the voice?³

Heschel's claim here is that God's voice in the Scriptures cannot properly be understood or answered by those who are "estranged" from the community, those who orient themselves to life as generic individuals or even as isolated Jewish individuals. While Heschel would agree that being community-minded does not in itself guarantee an understanding of the Bible, he would assert that it is a crucial element in responding to God as Jews. Without this element, individuals can certainly hear and respond to God in important ways, but when the communal dimension is missing, something vital has been lost.

The guiding premise of my paper parallels Heschel: *The Besorah must be presented to, and received by, Jews as members of the community of Israel.* The relationship of Jews to the *Besorah* is more than the problem of isolated individual faith. A version of the *Besorah* presented to Jews purely as individuals is inherently defective, a distorted account of God's covenantal love as expressed in the Scriptures and carried forward in Jewish tradition. The idea and feeling of community must penetrate and characterize the *Besorah*.

³ Heschel p. 246

But what does it mean to respond as members of a community? We feel differently when a member of our community dies – Americans in Iraq, Jews in Israel. Americans celebrate a certain day in November that no one else celebrates. I act in certain ways when I watch sports in which *my* team is involved. Members of ethnic groups normally feel a sense of identity with that group. Even in this individualistic society, much of what we is influenced by communities of which we are a part. Responding as members of a community means that in my thinking, feeling, and decision-making, I resonate with the community. I take into account the effect that my life and decisions will have on the community, the well-being of the community, the norms of the community, and the future of the community.

On the other hand, acting as members of a community does *not* imply that individuals must accept all community norms or values without reflection. For instance, one can be a true American even if one is conscientiously opposed to a war that America is involved in, or disagrees with certain cultural assumptions that are dominant in this country.

There can be instances in which we act or think in ways that are marginal or unaccepted in the community, even while, in other ways, we act within that community's norms. The civil rights movement was an essential development in American life. Its proponents were perceived by many as anti-American, but it is clear that their primary goal was to gain the freedom for African-Americans to participate fully in American life. To be marginalized or even rejected by a community does not have to destroy our identification with that community or our feeling for it. Likewise our relationship with

the broader Jewish community: the key is to have the community in our *kishkas* in everything we do. We put the community's interests before our own.

Examining the Forum Topic

Redemption in the Jewish perspective refers to the renewal of Israel, all humanity, and the cosmic order. This perspective, first expressed in the Tanakh, is emphasized in the entire length and breadth of rabbinic writings from the Mishnah to the present, including Jewish mysticism, philosophy, and prayer. It is found to a significant degree in every movement in the wider Jewish community today.⁴

As Messianic Jews, we share this view with our fellow Jews. I have to question whether this is really true. I expect that most of us at this Forum affirm the Jewish perspective on *geulah* (redemption), but I doubt that this view is held (or even understood) by more than a modest minority in our movement. In my experience, most Messianic Jews are not very familiar with Jewish tradition in general or the Jewish perspective on redemption in particular. Instead, most Messianic Jews still share the individualistic notions of redemption held by the Christian movements from which we arose.⁵

It is a pivotal truth *that for us Yeshua is central to the accomplishment of this redemption.* But it is precisely because we do not *as a movement* understand and

⁴ In this paper, my thesis that the *Besorah* is communal in nature applies to the Jewish community worldwide. However, my comments on the specifics of the community, and ways of applying my thesis, are restricted to the American Jewish community, the only one with which I am sufficiently familiar.

⁵ Two problematic aspects of Reformation thought are the "total depravity of man" and the shift from an extreme communal hermeneutic ("the Church will tell you what the Bible says and what to believe") to an extreme individualistic hermeneutic ("the Bible is transparently knowable to every individual believer"). The moral self-torture and loneliness of Luther has pervaded Evangelical Christianity ever since.

embrace redemption *in Jewish perspective* that we have been largely unable to express *Yeshua's role in the Divine scheme of redemption* in that perspective.

The communal dimensions of Jewish life and of the Jewish view redemption are noticeably absent from the *Besorah* we have preached. What is missing in this *Besorah* is the dimension of perseverance in (or entrance into) the life and commitments of the broader Jewish community. Thus, in its contours and content, this *Besorah* fails to address the concept of *redemption in Jewish perspective – the renewal of Israel, all humanity, and the cosmic order* – as addressed in the Scriptures and expressed in both traditional and newer Judaisms.

Yeshua's redemptive role in the life of *Am Yisrael* (the Nation of Israel) has been difficult to find in this *Besorah*. Instead, Yeshua's role is normally expressed – whether by Christians, Jewish missions, or the average Messianic Jew – as the savior or redeemer of individuals, including individual Jews. The *Besorah* is framed in terms of saving the individual from hell and into heaven and relationship with God. This may be dressed in “Jewish” garb – we have said that Yeshua is “the Jewish Messiah” and “there is nothing more Jewish than believing in Yeshua.” We may even have spoken of Yeshua completing Jewish identity.

But individual Jews – and even Jews in group settings – are addressed primarily as lone entities making a purely personal decision. By its lack of Jewish communal context and its exclusive focus on private life, this version of the *Besorah* – for those Jews who respond to it – already begins to separate them from the community. For those

Jews who are *already* separated, such a *Besorah* may appeal to their “Jewishness” while at the same time confirming and deepening that separation.

The base definition of “community is “a group of people having ethnic or cultural or religious characteristics in common (e.g. “she was well known throughout New York’s Italian community”). In this sense, the world Jewish community consists of all the Jews in the world – *Am Yisrael* – and every Jew is part of that community.⁶ However, my use of the word “community” has a further dimension: In this paper I am using the term to refer to the visible Jewish community, the community that gathers self-consciously as Jews, at least on occasion. The Bernstein family picnic may be a gathering of Jews, but it is not what I mean here by “Jewish community” (unless the Bernsteins are connected to the community in other ways).⁷

Those Jews who embrace an individualistic *Besorah* are more likely to view the faith of Yeshua and their new life with God as primarily individual in nature. Should they join a church, they may come to view that church as their primary social group and – at best – regard their membership in Israel as “spiritual” (actually, ethereal). Jews who join a Messianic congregation will likely view participation in the congregation *as* participation in the Jewish community. However, in the typical Messianic congregation, the cues and pressures to relate to the larger Church world far outweigh those to relate to the larger Jewish community. It is not at all unusual to meet Messianic Jews who have rarely, or even never, ventured out of the Messianic congregational setting to participate

⁶ For obvious reasons, this paper cannot take into account the complex issue of “Who is a Jew?”

⁷ I do not mean to imply that the prophetic Scriptures do not apply to unaffiliated Jews. However, I do assert that Jews who do not participate in real-life corporate Israel do not share in the full dimensions of the Scriptures’ provisions for Israel.

in Jewish community events, who in fact have no idea of what is going on in the community or in the Jewish world except for current events in the Middle East.⁸ The result is the neglect of Jewish communal commitments,⁹ and a further distancing from the broader Jewish community and its traditions. Unless this separation is immediately addressed, the new disciple becomes increasingly less likely to retain or take on Jewish communal ties and obligations.

Considering the large number of Jews and Gentiles in our movement who have *never* participated in the Jewish community, or have ceased to do so, it is no wonder that Jews who join Messianic congregations are perceived by the Jewish community as having left the community.

Community and Jewish Prayer¹⁰

At its root, the Jewish community and *sense* of community was initiated by God in the life of Abraham and his family, the deliverance from Egypt, and the giving of Torah. On that foundation, Jewish liturgy began to be formed even while the Tanakh was

⁸ Messianic Jews who pursue communal commitments are often on their own, as their congregations rarely support such participation in practical ways. In fact, it is not unusual for Messianic Jews who maintain a commitment to the broader community to receive negative pressure from within the Messianic community.

⁹ Jewish “communal commitments” are Torah-based and related responsibilities and privileges expressed in ways that have been developed in our traditions. For example, Jewish prayer, *Ahavat Yisrael* (love of fellow Jews), *gemilut chasadim* (acts of kindness), Torah study, and cultural involvements.

¹⁰ In discussing Jewish prayer, I will use Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox siddurim. Comparing these liturgies is difficult. For more traditional congregations, the main service is on Saturday morning while the newer liturgies tend to focus on Friday evening. To compare the same service – for example, Friday evening – of all four movements is comparing “apples and oranges” major services with minor. If we compare the major services with one another, we are still comparing “apples and oranges” because there are important differences between the Friday night and Saturday morning liturgies. Also, Reform and Reconstructionist siddurim have alternative services rather than one set liturgy. In order to simplify matters, I have chosen to compare the first service printed in each Siddur.

still being written.¹¹ Liturgy has become perhaps the most powerful force to express the varied aspects of God's relationship with *Am Yisrael* and to shape and maintain Jewish communal identity. It is my assertion that liturgy, developed predominantly from Scriptural sources, has been the clearest ongoing expression of Jewish views of God, Israel, and redemption active in the lives of ordinary Jews and scholars alike.

Many factors have combined in the hands of God to influence the shape and content of Jewish communal identity over the centuries. Certainly the Scriptures (even aside from their incorporation in the liturgy and in preaching), Jewish study and writings, halakhah, and communal institutions have been highly influential. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Jewish family life. External social, political, and religious factors have also played an important role. But the experience of our common liturgy – whether in traditional or newer forms – has arguably been the most important single factor in giving shape, discrete content, and force to the Jewish communal consciousness of ordinary Jews, even in our times.¹²

Jewish communal identity is largely forged in the crucible of the liturgical worship experience. Much of the power of liturgy comes from its content and beauty.

¹¹ See Newman, Judith H. *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999

¹² In one sense, Jewish liturgy as a whole is a reading of Scripture. As such, it has arguably been more formative other Jewish readings of the Scriptures in the way Jews think. This was true in traditional Jewish society, where male Jews – apart from the elite, the Torah scholars – studied the Bible for a few years in *cheder* (elementary school) but participated in Jewish prayer three times daily their whole lives. Female Jews had less exposure to both. Very few Jews over the ages became familiar with Jewish Biblical commentary, Jewish philosophy, or other Jewish readings of Scripture. Even popular movements such as Chasidism were fully involved in Jewish communal prayer. The situation today is much the same. Most affiliated Jews receive the bulk of their Jewish education as part of the liturgical experience. Although certain Scriptural portions are repeated yearly, most non-Orthodox synagogues read the Torah itself on a three year cycle and most of the Tanakh is not read in any systematic way.

But its effectiveness is heightened because it is a whole-person experience, involving eyes, ears, mouth and body, and (hopefully) heart and mind.

In addition, Jewish prayer is a highly communal experience. It is normally experienced in a *minyan*, a gathering of at least ten Jews, the minimum required to pray an entire service. As we pray, we are aware that many similar groups of Jews are praying elsewhere. And the words of the liturgy show us that we are not only praying for those in this *minyan*, but in behalf of all Jews, whether or not those Jews pray. This shared experience powerfully reinforces the inward sense of community and the communal dimensions of relationship with God.

The Language of Liturgy

There are three primary roots associated with redemption in the Tanakh, which I will represent by *ga'al*, *padah*, and *yasha*. These words also have other uses (such as redemption from slavery, debt, etc., and rescue from personal danger). However, they all appear in crucial texts that concern every major aspect of the redemption of Israel – the redemption from Egypt, God’s ongoing redemption of Israel, and the eschatological redemption of Israel that will impact the nations. In the appendix I give a brief overview of how these roots are used. Here is one example, a passage that includes all three roots.

"Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you (*v'yosha'akhem*)... No lion will be there, nor will any vicious beast go up on it; these will not be found there. But the redeemed (*g'ulim*) will walk there, and the ransomed (*uf'duyei*) of the LORD will return, and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Is 35:4, 9-10)¹³

¹³ While I prefer the JPTS Tanakh as an all-purpose translation, I will use the NASV in this paper (occasionally revised) because it normally reflects the underlying Hebrew words directly in English. The

This passage deals with the future redemption. Although the roots each have their own semantic domain, there is significant overlap in meaning. The redemptive acts of God among Israel are characterized by all three. When the Tanakh is read in Hebrew, the cumulative effect of these usages is to develop an interwoven language of redemption that extends through the Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

Jewish liturgy picks up on this vocabulary. *Ga'al*, *padah*, and *yasha* form an integral part of Jewish liturgy's language of redemption. In the traditional Shabbat morning liturgy, we see these roots relating to redemption past, present, and future. In *Pesukei D'Zimrah* (verses of song), largely composed of psalms, we see passages like this:

Show us your kindness (*chas'd'kha*, from *chesed*), and grant us your salvation (*yesh'akha*). Arise to our help and redeem us (*f'deinu*) for your mercy's (*chas'd'kha*) sake [God responds:] "I am Adonai your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."¹⁴

God's response to our cry for present salvation and redemption is to remind us of the Exodus. The concepts are irrevocably bound together, motivated by God's *chesed*. Normally translated as mercy, kindness, or loving-kindness, *chesed* is arguably the Tanakh's most forceful word expressing God's love.

In the powerful *Nishmat* ("The soul of all living things" – an extra-Biblical psalm possibly written by Shimon Kefa¹⁵), we read

JPS Tanakh and NIV use "dynamic equivalence" and are sometimes irregular in the way they translate underlying words and concepts.

¹⁴ Artscroll p. 372, 374 (Hebrew). This passages is a collage taken from Ps. 85:8, 44:27, and 81:11)

¹⁵ So stated by Rabbenu Tam and mentioned in the A. Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash*, 1938, page 12 and the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (online, no page number).

... other than You we have no other King, Redeemer (*go'el*) or Saviour (*moshia*), no Redeemer (*podeh*), Rescuer, Provider, and Merciful One (*m'racheim*)... You redeemed us (*g'altanu*) from Egypt, Hashem our God, and redeemed us (*p'ditanu*) from the house of bondage.¹⁶

The first part of this quote is a string of words with similar or overlapping connotations. The last part of the quote is a typical Hebrew parallelism, in which *g'altanu* and *p'ditanu* are loosely synonymous. In the *Nishmat*, as in the previous quote from Exodus, we see all three of our roots related to the deliverance from Egypt.

In *Ha'kol yodukha* (All will thank you) among the blessings before the *Shema*, we find a powerful reference to the final redemption:

And who is like you? There is none who resembles you, Adonai our God, in this world; and there is none besides you, our King, in the life of the World to Come; nothing except you, our Redeemer (*go'aleinu*) in the Days of Messiah. And there is none like you, our Savior (*moshienu*), in the Resurrection of the Dead.¹⁷

We find similar themes in the *Avot* (“Fathers” or “Ancestors”) and the *Gevurot* (Powers), the first two blessings of the Amidah:

Remember your mercy (*chesdei*) to the fathers, and bring a Redeemer (*go'el*) to their children's children. Resurrector of the Dead are you, abundant to save (*l'hoshia*). You sustain the living in mercy (*chesed*) and resurrect the dead in your abundant compassion (*rachamim*).¹⁸

As we can see, God's *chesed* and *rachamim* – both expressions of His intense love – are the root of redemption. Because of God's love, He sends a personal Redeemer to bring about the resurrection and the Life to Come.

Following the *Shema*, in the *Geulah* (“Redemption”), the newer liturgies lay out a clear paradigm of God's faithfulness to Israel based on the redemption from Egypt.

Unfortunately, our key words, though they appear often in the Hebrew, are not always

¹⁶ *The Complete Artscroll Siddur, Nusach Ashkanaz*. Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1990, p. 400, 402 (Hebrew)

¹⁷ Artscroll p. 408 (Hebrew)

¹⁸ Artscroll p. 420 (Hebrew)

translated directly. For example, “The one who redeems us (*ha’podeinu*) from the power of kings, the one who redeems us (*go’aleinu*) from the hand of tyrants” is translated “it is God who saves us from the hand of governments, the very palm of tyrants.”¹⁹ Although the overall passage does give a sense of redemption, the translation loses the power of the Hebrew parallelism and the underlying vocabulary of redemption is compromised.

In the *Avot* of the newer liturgies, God is blessed for bringing “redemption to [Israel’s] children’s children.” The idea of redemption is retained, but the personal redeemer is eliminated. *Go’el* (Redeemer) has been changed to *geulah* (redemption).²⁰ Likewise, since newer liturgies do not affirm the resurrection, in key passages that are normally associated with future redemption, the traditional *meichayei metim* (who resurrects the dead) has been changed in one siddur to *meichayei kol chai* (“who sustains all the living”)²¹ and in another to *meichayei ha’kol* (translated as “all life is your gift”).²²

There are, however, several significant insertions in the newer liturgies. In the Reconstructionist siddur, in the *Shalom rav* (Abundant peace) of the Friday evening Amidah, the blessing on “all Israel” is extended to “all who dwell on the earth.” This phrase is repeated in the concluding blessing of the Amidah, *Oseh shalom* (Grant peace). The Reform siddur contains a special section of liturgy – not a normal part of the service – on the theme of redemption, in which faith in a personal redeemer is asserted and the application of redemption to all of humanity is made very explicit with quotes from the

¹⁹ *Kol Ha’neshamah*. Wyncote, PA: The Reconstructionist Press, 1993. Pages 82-83

²⁰ *Kol Ha’neshamah* pp. 101-102

²¹ *Kol Ha’neshamah* pp. 102-103

²² *Gates of Prayer*. New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis. Pages 133-134

prophets.²³ In my view, these insertions improve the language of the traditional siddur, expressing more clearly the concept that world redemption extends to all nations.



The Jewish view of redemption begins with the assumption that the renewal of all things begins with God and Israel, not with God and the individual Jew. The intermediate prayers of the daily Amidah – as found in the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox siddurim – reflect this understanding of *geulah*. After asking corporately for wisdom, repentance, and forgiveness, we pray for *geulah*:

Look on our affliction, take up our grievance, and redeem (*g'aleinu*) us speedily for your name's sake. Blessed are you, Hashem, Redeemer (*go'oel*) of Israel.²⁴

We then ask for a communal infusion of complete healing, abundance, freedom, the restoration of justice, the uprooting the enemies of Israel²⁵, and God's compassion for the righteous. The last intermediate blessings focus on God's return, His dwelling within, and rebuilding of, Jerusalem, as well as the restoration of Davidic rule and Temple worship. These themes are all aspects of redemption.

The Reform siddur has some interesting revisions of the intermediate blessings. On the one hand, some of the petitions are given a more universal scope, expressive of a deeper consciousness of Israel's part in the redemption of the world. For example, the traditional version of the *Qibbutz galuyot* ("Ingathering of exiles") blessing reads,

Sound the great shofar for our [Israel's] freedom, raise the banner to gather our exiles and gather us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed are You, Hashem, who gathers the dispersed ones of his people Israel.²⁶

²³ Gates of Prayer pp. 707-710

²⁴ Taken from Ps 119:153-154 See the various siddurim.

²⁵ Not present in the Reform version.

²⁶ Artscroll pp. 106-107

In its English, the Reform version reads

Sound the great horn to proclaim freedom, inspire us to strive for the liberation of the oppressed,²⁷ and let the song of liberty be heard in the four corners of the earth. Blessed is the Lord, Redeemer (*podeh*) of the oppressed.²⁸

And so, in these alterations the Reform siddur expresses aspects of *geulah* that – while focused on all of humanity – reinforce the sense of Israel’s role in *geulah*.

The traditional daily Amidah is a primer in Jewish thought. It expresses the core theology of Judaism. The thought of traditional Jews has been shaped by this prayer. However, only a very small percentage of Jews now pray daily. Far more affiliated Jews attend only on Shabbat and perhaps pray only on Shabbat. Their experience of, and inculcation in, Jewish thought, depends heavily on the Friday night or Saturday morning Shabbat service.

The traditional and newer Jewish Shabbat liturgies show the same emphases as daily prayer. In looking at Shabbat prayer, I will therefore shift ground a bit and look not at the themes of *geulah* – which are found on Shabbat as in daily prayer – but at the way the liturgies use various linguistic markers to emphasize the communal nature of prayer and of our standing before God.

One of those markers is the final *-nu*. One of the meanings of *-nu* is “our.” It is attached to all sorts of words to indicate our relationship to that word. Examples are *Eloheinu* (our God), *libeinu* (our heart), *podeinu* (our redeemer), *goaleinu* (our redeemer), and *moshienu* (our savior).

²⁷ A more direct translation would be “... for the redemption of *our* oppressed.”

²⁸ Gates of Prayer p. 41

It can also mean “us.” Examples are *aleinu* (upon us), *qab’tzeinu* (gather us), *immanu* (with us), *ya’aneinu* (answer us), *hashivenu* (return us), and *s’lach lanu* (forgive us).

It can also mean “we”, as in *batachnu* (we trusted), *khalinu* (we were consumed), *ra’inu* (we saw).

This suffix saturates Jewish liturgy. In the traditional Shabbat morning service, it is found well over three hundred times! In newer liturgies, the number is smaller, in part because the services are much shorter. The Reconstructionist Shabbat Ma’ariv has a higher percentage of personal prayer²⁹ but still has about one hundred occurrences of the final *-nu*. The first Shabbat service in the Reform Siddur has about eighty. In any case, in both Hebrew and in its English translations this suffix imparts a pervasive sense of the communal nature of Jewish prayer.

In addition to all these *-nu*’s, there are numerous verbs in the first person plural, such as *nagid* (we will tell), *naqdish* (we will sanctify), *nodeh* (we will proclaim), *n’sapeir* (we will recount). Finally, there are several words signifying the community of Jews, such as *am’kha* (your people), *Tzion*, and *Yisrael*. The cumulative effect of this vocabulary is the powerful enhancing of communal identity and relationship with God. The language of liturgy acts as a sort of Jewish catechism, imparting the basic beliefs and sensibilities of Judaism.

²⁹ In Jewish liturgies, preliminary prayer in the first person singular has traditionally been intended, at least in part, to draw those praying into the communal dimensions of prayer. The Reconstructionist Siddur seems to have a greater emphasis on this preliminary prayer, but still ends moves into communal prayer as do the other siddurim.

In addition to linguistic markers, the words of redemption are tied into often-repeated phrases that link the sense of Jewish communal identity to God and redemption.

Here are some examples:

- *ga'al Yisrael* (he redeemed Israel)
- *goaleinu goel avoteinu* (our redeemer and our ancestors' redeemer)
- *f'deinu l'ma'an chas'd'kha* (redeem us for the sake of your mercy)
- *magein u-moshia livneihem acharehem b'chol dor v'dor* (Shield and Saviour to their children after them through all generations)
- *Ein lanu melekh goel u'moshia, podeh u-matzil u-mefarnes u-meracheim, b'chol eit tzara u-tzuqah* (We have no other King, Redeemer, and Savior, who redeems and rescues and provides and has mercy, at every time of affliction or hardship)

In all, the language of liturgy imparts a pervasive sense of communal prayer – *we* are praying, *we* are standing before God. Although we also find individual prayer within the framework of communal prayer – especially in the first portions of the morning services – the sense of community permeates the texts of all Jewish liturgies, whether traditional or newer. The absorption of the individual in the desire for communal blessing is distilled in the *Sim Shalom* (Grant peace) of the daily and Shabbat Amidah:

“Grant peace, goodness, blessing, graciousness, kindness (*chesed*), and compassion (*rachamim*) upon us and upon all of Your people, Israel. Bless us, our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your countenance.”³⁰

The only elements of Jewish prayer that outweigh the language of community are the many varied and extravagant ways that worship and love of God is expressed throughout every Jewish liturgy, traditional or newer, daily, Shabbat, Festival, and High Holy days.

³⁰ Artscroll p. 428-9

All this being said, it is no secret that the majority of synagogue members attend services only on the High Holidays and special family occasions such as Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. Those who attend High Holiday services have normally attended Shabbat services for at least several years of their lives, thus being exposed to the catechism of weekly prayer that forms the foundation of their synagogue experience. Space does not allow me to examine the High Holiday prayers, but those who are familiar with them are aware that the themes and language of redemption and community pervade these services perhaps even more powerfully than the daily or Shabbat services.

The communal outlook and language of Jewish liturgy must pervade our *Besorah*. This must not be a mere tactic to appeal to Jewish sensibilities but must arise from our recognition of the legitimacy of the Jewish view of redemption that arose in the soil of the Tanakh. It must also come from a deep conviction about the communal nature of the *Besorah* itself.

The Communal Dimensions of the Apostolic Besorah

The pattern of apostolic preaching is a compelling argument for my thesis that the *Besorah must be presented to, and received by, Jews as members of the community of Israel*, that a version of the *Besorah* presented to Jews purely as individuals is inherently deficient.³¹

By definition, audiences in Jerusalem and in Diaspora synagogues were overwhelmingly Jewish. How did Shimon Kefa and Shaul shape their message to this audience?

³¹ In referencing apostolic preaching, I am not asserting that we are commanded to preach exactly as they did. They are not presented to us as commandments. They are, nevertheless, powerful models.

Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven. Kefa... declared to them: "Men of Judea, and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give heed to my words. Men of Israel, listen to these words..."

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Messiah-- this Yeshua whom you crucified." Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Kefa and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"

And Kefa said to them, "Repent, and let each of you be immersed in the name of Yeshua the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself." (Acts 2:5-39, selected)

These words clearly addressed those present *as part of the people/nation of Israel*. Representatives of every Jewish community world-wide were present.³² They were addressed as "men of Judea... men of Israel"³³ and were given a message intended "for all the house of Israel." This was clearly not a message addressed to generic human beings. It was not addressed simply to a collection of individuals and was not focused on the individual, although individual *teshuvah* (repentance) was passionately sought ("Repent, and let each of you be immersed...").

The message/promise was intended not only for the Jewish people ("you and your children") but also for the nations of the world ("all who are far off"³⁴). Redemption is meant for all humanity.

Kefa... replied to the people, "Men of Israel... The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Yeshua, the one whom you delivered up, and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him... Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in

³² Acts 2:5

³³ This took place at Succot, when all Jewish men were required to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the audience is represented as "living (dwelling) in Jerusalem.

³⁴ I admit that this could refer to the far-flung Jewish communities of the Roman Empire. My reading of the passage implies that the Jews present were already representative of all Jewish communities world-wide. Thus "you and your children" would refer to "all Jews of this and following generations; "all who are far off" refers to Gentiles (see Eph. 2:13)

order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Yeshua, the Messiah appointed for you... Moses said, 'The LORD God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to him you shall give heed' in everything He says to you.

"It is you who are the sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' For you first, God raised up His Servant, and sent Him to bless you by turning every one *of you* from your wicked ways." (Acts 3:12-26, selected)

Once again, the audience was addressed in communal terms, as "men of Israel," descendants of the Patriarchs. Yeshua was clearly identified as the "prophet like Moses." The prophets and the covenant were invoked. "For you (the Jewish people, not just those present that day) first, God raised up His Servant." Shimon Kefa's intention was clearly to induce a national turning to the Messiah in order to bless the entire world ("all the families of the earth").

The envisioned sequence is Messiah → Israel → the redemption of all humanity. It is clear that Shimon understood that the nations were intended to participate in the blessing. However, he did not yet understand that they would participate at the deepest levels.

When Shimon was given opportunity to address a Gentile audience, he presented his message in the context of God's priority on preaching to "the sons of Israel."

"The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Yeshua the Messiah (He is Lord of all)..." (Acts 10: 36)

Shimon understood that forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed to the nations,³⁵ and so he offered it to his Gentile audience (verse 43). Even though the early Jewish disciples had some notion of God's purpose for the nations, they "were amazed, because the gift of

³⁵ Luke 24:47 (see Is. 52:15, etc.)

the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also." (verse 45) This incident not only represents a transition in Shimon's thought and practice, it also contributed to the ferment in the early Messianic community that led to the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 and the formal inclusion of Gentiles in the *ekkllesia*.

Turning to Shaul's preaching, we know that he was entrusted with the *Besorah* to the Gentiles,³⁶ yet the records indicate that he consistently brought it first to the synagogue.

"Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: The God of this people Israel chose our fathers... Brethren, sons of Abraham's family, and those among you who fear God... And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Yeshua ... (Acts 13:16-33, selected)

Shaul addressed this Diaspora synagogue (in Pisidian Antioch) just as Shimon had addressed his Jewish audiences. He presented the *Besorah* as a communal message to Jews³⁷ wherever he went. However, he was always ready to fulfill Yeshua's mandate to bring the *Besorah* to the Gentiles.

But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. And Shaul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For thus the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing ... (Acts 13:45-48)

Even as Shaul and Barnabas were turning to the Gentiles, they reaffirmed the covenantal, communal message to Israel. The quotation from Isaiah 49:6, which is

³⁶ Rom. 15:16; Gal. 2:7-9

³⁷ "Men of Israel and you who fear God..." could refer to Jews and Gentile "God-fearers" who were functionally involved in the Jewish community or it could be a parallelism meaning "You men of Israel who fear God..."

thematically tied to Isaiah 42:6 and 60:3, is fascinating.³⁸ These three citations all appear in the context of the redemption of Israel and the nations. Luke 2:32 and Acts 26:23 clearly apply this quote to Yeshua as God's Servant. However, I suggest that here in Acts 13 Shaul and Barnabas take it for granted that Isaiah 49:6 is a commandment given to Israel as a community.³⁹

By tapping into the Servant Songs rather than the commissioning words spoken to Shaul by the resurrected Yeshua, ("Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel."⁴⁰), Shaul makes it clear that this turning to the Gentiles is not merely his personal mission, but a Jewish covenantal responsibility.⁴¹ Despite the failure of the Jews of Pisidian Antioch to embrace the *Besorah*, Shaul and Barnabas would fulfill their communal obligations by conveying the *Besorah* to the Gentiles.

In quoting these "sermons," I have not attempted to convey their full sense, but to show that *the apostolic message was addressed to Jews primarily as members of a covenant community rather than as individuals*. In Acts, the *Besorah* to the Jews was a message preached by members of the Jewish community to the community as a whole, whether in Jerusalem or in the Diaspora. The message was communal in its context and content. Although individual response was crucial to this pursuit, the audience was

³⁸ This is not the venue to discuss the interpretive history of the Servant Songs, but Acts 13:47 is certainly crucial to that discussion.

³⁹ Alternative explanations – that (a) Isaiah's words were given as personal prophecy to Shaul and Barnabas, or (b) Shaul and Barnabas were somehow participating in Yeshua's Messianic work as a light to the nations – have little to recommend them in this context.

⁴⁰ Acts 9:16

⁴¹ Space does not allow me to delve into Acts 21, where Shaul and the Messianic Jewish community in Jerusalem strongly affirm the ongoing nature of Jewish covenantal obligations even as they glorified God because of what He had done among the Gentiles.

addressed primarily not as individuals seeking a fuller personal Jewish identity, deeper meaning in life, solutions to their problems, or hope for the life to come – but as members of the community of Israel. Moreover, the community of Israel was seen as an agent of God to bring blessings to the nations of the world. We would do well to frame our *Besorah* in similar terms.

Yeshua and the Community

From the earliest narratives of the Brit Hadashah, Yeshua is seen as the source of Israel's redemption. This is declared dramatically by Zechariah after learning that his son would become the forerunner of the Messiah:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant – as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old – salvation *from our enemies* and *from the hand of all who hate us*; to show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to Abraham our father, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days... to give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, (Luke 1:68-75, 77)

Zechariah is not envisioning the salvation of a remnant of Jews and their absorption and disappearance into another entity (the Church). In fact, I am not aware of anything in the Scriptures that portrays the Messianic Jewish community as a remnant that is disconnected and isolated from Jewish communal life⁴². The whole sense of Zechariah's prophecy supports the idea of a communal redemption for Israel, a redemption in which Messiah and the forgiveness of sin play central roles.

⁴² In *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), John Howard Yoder makes a compelling case, based on contemporary scholarship, that there is no historical evidence for systematic separation of Messianic Jewish communities from the larger Jewish community until *at least* the later second century.

This theme is taken up in the apostolic preaching we have already cited, showing clearly that God's purpose for *Am Yisrael* is fulfilled only through Yeshua:

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Messiah-- this Yeshua whom you crucified.” (Acts 2:36)

“The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Yeshua... “Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Yeshua, the Messiah appointed for you... For you first, God raised up His Servant, and sent Him to bless you by turning every one *of you* from your wicked ways.” (Acts 3: 13-20, selected)

“The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Yeshua the Messiah (He is Lord of all)...” (Acts 10: 36)

“And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Yeshua ...” (Acts 13: 32-33)

In the *Besorah* – addressed to a people, not simply to individuals – Yeshua is presented as the key to the redemption of Israel and of the world. It is on this basis that the apostles urge the entire community to embrace Yeshua.

The pivotal place of Yeshua vis-à-vis God's purposes is elaborated even more broadly elsewhere in the Brit Hadashah. God began all things through Messiah and for his sake: “He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible... all things have been created by Him and for Him” (Col 1:15-16). “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom 11:36). Everything God does is through Yeshua, presumably including God's choice and formation of Israel was by and for Yeshua.

The entire created order is sustained in the Messiah: “And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Col 1:17). This includes human society, all life,

and the cosmos, which will also find their completion and highest meaning in the Messiah. This is expressed powerfully in Shaul's reference to the future "summing up of all things in Messiah, things in the heavens and things on earth" (Eph 1:10).

I suggest that our *Besorah* needs to emphasize that the Messiah is essential to individual Jews precisely because he is the Messiah/Redeemer of *all* Israel. His role in the redemption of Israel is a facet of his very nature as the author and goal of all things. While the place of personal response to the gospel should not be ignored, it is a significant loss to reduce Yeshua to the savior of individuals while barely mentioning that *Yeshua is central to the accomplishment of redemption for Israel, all humanity, and the cosmic order.*

What Makes Us a Community?

We have seen that the concepts, linguistic fabric, and the very experience of Scripture and Jewish liturgy express the communal nature of our existence and our relationship with God. But what constitutes us a community in the first place? Although historical, social, cultural, and political factors contribute to our sense of community, many of them could easily work against it as well.⁴³ The same suffering that united us in the ghetto and the *shtetl* often drove us away from the fold when we were free to move about as we pleased. The same freedom that enables Jews to congregate in certain neighborhoods also enables us to move far away from those neighborhoods.

⁴³ This is true even within the Jewish state. The nation of Israel today is subject both to cultural assimilation to the West and to geopolitical instability.

In a review⁴⁴ of Scott Bader-Saye's *Church and Israel after Christendom: The Politics of Election*,⁴⁵ Randi Rashkover discusses the author's view of chosenness. He points out that Bader-Saye

... relies heavily on David Novak's *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* and Michael Wyschogrod's *The Body of Faith: God in the People Israel*, two relatively recent works that attempt to refamiliarize Jews with the biblical-rabbinic doctrine of election.

... Calling upon David Novak's theological definition, a Jew, Bader-Saye claims, is "one who participates with the Jewish people in the history of God's election and covenant" (30)...

Guided by Novak and Wyschogrod, Bader-Saye... rightly claims that it is precisely because Jewish identity is lodged in an act of the loving God that the Jews were able to maintain an identity as a people even after their exile from the land of Israel... Bader-Saye is interested in drawing a portrait of the Jews as a people who maintains a political identity separate and different from the other nations of the world, rooted in God's own desire for a just and blessed world.

Election, however, is not only God's choice of Israel but Israel's response to God... (38).

Briefly put, the primary factor that makes us "a people" is the fact that God has chosen us. This is encountered frequently in Scriptures and in Jewish liturgy.⁴⁶

Because God has chosen us not merely to exist, but also to act in this world, our communal identity is also shaped by *our* choice, as individuals and as a people. In every

⁴⁴ Randi Rashkover, "Judaism's Twentieth-Century Conversations" in *Cross Currents*, Winter 1999/2000, 49.4. Also available at <http://www.crosscurrents.org/rashkover2.htm>.

⁴⁵ Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999

⁴⁶ "Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has chosen us out of all the nations and given us his Torah." / "For you have chosen us and sanctified us out of all the nations, and have given us the Sabbath as an inheritance in love and favour. Praised are you, Lord, who hallows the Sabbath." / Blessed are You O Lord Who has chosen the people of Israel with love."

generation, we must decide whether or not to participate “with the Jewish people in the history of God's election and covenant⁴⁷”.

To remove this sense of chosenness is to disembowel the Scriptural testimony of God's history with Israel, to eviscerate the writings of our sages through the centuries, and to excise the primary element in the Jewish communal fabric.

The Discomfort of Chosenness

We are all familiar with Tevye's cry, “I know, I know. We are your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't you choose someone else?” That cry came from the depths of personal and communal suffering that *shtetl* Jews experienced. Today, many Jews are expressing discomfort with the idea of Jewish chosenness, but for very different reasons.

There is a broad spectrum of views on chosenness in the official pronouncements and private opinions of the broader Jewish community.

Among the organized Judaisms, only the Reconstructionist movement rejects the concept of chosenness. Following the ideas of its founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the *Platform on Reconstructionism* (1986) states that the idea of chosenness is “morally untenable,” because anyone who has such beliefs “implies the superiority of the elect community and the rejection of others.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Bader-Saye p. 30. Bader-Saye seems to be asserting that an individual who does not make this choice is no longer a Jew. If so, I disagree, as would halakhah. However, when failing to make this choice, Jews chart a road that leads to assimilation.

⁴⁸ Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, Sept. 1986, pages D, E.

Orthodoxy adheres to chosenness, with some groups even holding to the view, developed in medieval Europe, that the Jewish soul is inherently superior to the Gentile soul. Both Reform and Conservative Judaism affirm a more moderate concept of chosenness in their official documents, bending over backward to explain themselves in ways that they hope will appeal more directly to the contemporary Jewish mind.⁴⁹

When we go beyond official pronouncements, however, we find a very different picture. For example, there is a newer, informal network called “Renewal Judaism,” a pastiche of Judaism and various New Age, Native American, and Eastern religious ideas and practices. Renewal Judaism can be found in *Tikkun* magazine, the child of R. Michael Lerner, in numbers of independent chavurot and synagogues, and among individuals who may also be members of the major denominations. Many Renewal-oriented Jews are active in Jewish groups involved in *Tikkun Olam* (Repair of the World).⁵⁰ One Jewish Renewal website, called “Simply Jewish,” makes this statement:

We recognize all beings as manifestations of God, all religions as attempts to articulate the Ineffable, and all scripture as sources of Truth. We reject all notions of chosenness and uphold the equality of all beings in, with, and as God.⁵¹

This quote expresses the tension between the concepts of chosenness and equality. It is a tension constantly bubbling beneath the surface of most “official” Judaism. The underlying idea is that it is not conceivable that a moral God would chose one people

⁴⁹ See “Emet Ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism” JTSA, New York, 1988; *Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism*, adopted at the 1999 Pittsburgh Convention, Central Conference of American Rabbis

⁵⁰ Originally a conception of Isaac Luria (1534-1572), *Tikkun Olam* referred to the theurgic effects of keeping the *mitzvot* with proper *kavannah* (intention./concentration) as understood kabbalistically. It is now broadly applied social and environmental action. It fits under our categories of *to the renewal of... all humanity and the cosmic order*.

⁵¹ http://www.simplyjewish.com/sj_manifesto.html

above others.⁵² For example, Reform's *Second Pittsburgh Platform* of 1999, which affirms that "the Jewish people is bound to God by an eternal covenant (*b'rit*)," evoked these comments by Reform synagogue members:⁵³

Brit is a poor choice of words because it implies a certain theology which is uncomfortable for some Reform Jews.

The statement also could be read to imply a version of chosenness which is anathema to many.

The ideas of covenant and chosenness are both rejected because of their uncomfortable implications.

Although Conservative Judaism affirms chosenness, its official website has little to say about it apart from the "Statement of Principles." What little it does say indicates a problem in Conservative Judaism. In the constitution of the United Synagogue Youth, the core ambivalence among so many Jews today is clearly expressed:

[Chosenness] is a difficult idea to propose to liberal-thinking American Jewish youth, who will immediately associate chosenness with superiority. But unless they are made to feel that the Jews have a role to fulfill and that group survival is essential, they will not make the necessary effort to accept their responsibility as bulwarks against assimilation.⁵⁴

The dilemma expressed here is that the very concept (chosenness) that would conceivably motivate young Jews to keep their Jewish communal commitments is unacceptable to them.

Conservative synagogue officials are also grappling with this issue. Last year, the organization of executive directors and administrators of Conservative synagogues across

⁵² The counter-argument, that Jews were chosen not as an expression of their superiority, but for a mission, does not "fly" here. Long ago, Mordecai Kaplan pointed out that such service is a high privilege, and a moral God would not restrict such service to one people.

⁵³ <http://www.templebethdavid.com/platform.htm>

⁵⁴ http://www.uscj.org/metny/dobbsghc/USY/new_page_14.htm

North America came together to discuss "Chosenness and Ambivalence."⁵⁵ The very theme of the conference speaks volumes – one can hardly imagine an Orthodox conference on the same subject.

I can add personal experience here. For several years I have participated in Conservative Torah study groups. Whenever the subject of chosenness comes up in the text – as it often does – there is general discomfort or outright rejection expressed. To these Jews, chosenness implies superiority, an inherently unacceptable idea. Interestingly, when the Rabbi – the official Jew, so to speak – is present, he defends chosenness. Most of the time, the Rabbi isn't there – and the sense of ambivalence or rejection clearly wins out

Becoming Jewish Educators

The leadership of the broader Jewish community is well aware of the distance between official pronouncements and private opinions. The high degree of agnosticism among Jews – even affiliated Jews – in the wake of the Holocaust has understandably weakened the sense of community based on God's initiative and preservation. Both agnosticism and changing views of God have undermined belief in chosenness.

Those who have rejected chosenness yet remain affiliated, base Jewish solidarity and community on other factors.⁵⁶ Those who retain the concepts of covenant and chosenness as aspects of *geulah* – especially among the rabbinate – understand their

⁵⁵ <http://www.jtsa.edu/news/jtsnews/vol5iss2/naase.shtml>

⁵⁶ For example, a simple visceral desire to maintain Jewish continuity, the beauty and uniqueness of Jewish traditions and moral concepts, and the view that all religions are called to worship God in their own way, none superior to others; (3)

importance and seek to include them in communal discussion and education, both for children and for adults. But they are fighting an uphill battle.

In addition to affiliated Jews who cannot embrace chosenness, there are many Jews who have lost their connection to the community – or perhaps never were connected. Their sense of community is weak or non-existent and their compassion for the weak (which may be very real) has been disassociated from the *geulah* that involves the Jewish people in the Messianic transformation of the world. The loss of a sense of chosenness is why writers such as Novak and Wyschogrod are attempting to “refamiliarize Jews with the biblical-rabbinic doctrine of election.”⁵⁷

The Messianic Jewish sub-community *does* grasp of the doctrine of election. Although this is problematic to most Jews today, it is vital to a *Besorah* that is communal in nature. If we are able to make the experiential journey into full participation in the communal realities of the Jewish people, we will be positioned to join Novak and Wyschogrod in their crucial endeavor.⁵⁸ This will require us to mingle our deep sense of God, covenant, and vocation with the communal experience and language of Jewish prayer and life.

As we join a nearby synagogue Torah study – or participate in events such as community study on Tishe b’Av⁵⁹ – we will join the communal discussion, listen, learn,

⁵⁷ Rashkover, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Of course, we have so much more to learn ourselves. The attitude that only we have something to give – and that we have nothing we need to hear – is the surest way to continue the alienation that has existed between us and the broader Jewish community. I believe that dialogue is – in our culture and at this time – a (or the) primary means of communicating the *Besorah* to Jews. In true dialogue both (or all) parties have something to give and something to learn.

⁵⁹ This is not at all meant to disparage cultural involvements such as participation in aspects of Jewish life at the local JCC, Jewish music concerts, etc.

and, with humility, bring *from the text we are studying* a sense of the reality of God, and all that flows from God to our community and to the world. Also, as we speak from an authentic sense of community, our general conversation with other Jews, affiliated or not, will nudge them toward an increased sense of community.

Chosenness and Postmodernism

It is no accident that today's Jews struggle with the idea of chosenness. This struggle began with the rise of Reform Judaism in mid-nineteenth century Germany. On the heels of the rise of the modern nation-state and the granting of Jewish citizenship, there was an intense desire on the part of this new movement to fit into broader German society while retaining a sense of Jewishness. This desire carried over to the United States as Reform took root and prospered here. The struggle intensified after the Holocaust as a result of questions about God's justice or even God's very existence. If God is too remote to care about the millions who suffered and died, or unable or unwilling to intervene, then of what value is chosenness? If there is no God to choose, there can be no chosenness.

But there is another factor that has entered the picture the past several decades – the rise of postmodernism as a pervasive influence in Western civilization generally and in the vast majority of Jews, who are deeply rooted in that civilization.

Certain aspects of the postmodern critique are a needed challenge to the often simplistic and reductionist ways that religious beliefs are expressed in American congregations. However, there are principal aspects of postmodernism that come into

direct conflict with the *Besorah*. One of these is the core assertion of postmodernism is that there is no overarching narrative that explains or forms the context of other narratives. In other words, there is no Big Picture.

The postmodern claim is that all texts and narratives are inherently incomplete. No matter how the pages and chapters are multiplied, no matter how the story is elaborated and augmented, it is intrinsic to the very nature of language and communication that all books, all narratives, all attempts to communicate are incomplete, filled with gaps and incoherence. This is not a defect that can be remedied, but is structurally inherent in any text.

These structural defects in narratives are said to undermine the pretense of any and every text to a place of authority over any other text or narrative. There is no way of knowing that one essentially defective and incomplete text is superior to any another because there is no way to get outside all possible texts in order to evaluate them from a place of objectivity.⁶⁰ This leads to the assertion that neither cultures nor religions, which gain their coherence from texts and narratives, have any basis for asserting authority or superiority over others. Simply put, *there is ultimately no objective basis for the claims of any religion.*

Although only a small percentage of individuals, Jewish or otherwise, are deeply familiar with postmodern thought, the effects of that thought have permeated several

⁶⁰ It is my contention that postmodernism has not demonstrated the structural incompleteness of reality, only of the way we can know or describe reality. In fact, the deconstructionist project is inherently unable to make claims about reality, for any narrative purporting to describe reality – including its own – is inherently flawed.

generations of academics who have taught our teachers and our children. Even though postmodernism itself is beginning to fade, its ideas – even if somewhat dumbed down – have saturated our culture. It is now common for it to be considered morally objectionable for any culture or religion to assert the superiority of its narrative or values.

The postmodern leveling of cultures, religions, and their narratives only intensified modern and post-Holocaust Jewish discomfort with chosenness. There was a major disparity between these two forces, however. The modern Jew, such as Mordecai Kaplan, rejected chosenness while advocating a Jewish civilization characterized by a more universal morality. But postmodernism rejects even the possibility of any such universal morality.

These distinctions, however, have been lost on most Post-Holocaust Jews. The bottom line has been that Jewish chosenness is becoming less and less acceptable, regardless of how it is explained by official Judaisms. In addition, postmodernism's extreme undermining of texts and accessible truth gives today's non-Orthodox Jew no place to go to gain any level of certainty.

How can Messianic Judaism respond to this?⁶¹ First, I think we can agree that in many ways the Bible as a text is not “complete.” It is filled with God's wisdom and the message of God's love and redemption. It makes coherent and compelling statements about God and humanity that inherently claim to correspond to reality. As Italian scholar Umberto Eco stated (about the nature of books in general),

⁶¹ My purpose here is not to give a detailed response to these postmodern claims, but a basic direction as to how we can incorporate a basic response to the influences of postmodern thought as we share the *Besorah*. I have in mind that we are speaking not to philosophers but to “average Jews.”

The book offers us a text which, while being open to multiple interpretations, tells us something that cannot be modified... Alas, with an already written book, whose fate is determined by repressive authorial decision, we... are obliged to accept fate and to realize that we are unable to change destiny.⁶²

The context of Eco's remarks is a tongue-in-cheek response to the postmodern thirst for almost unlimited interpretive freedom from authorial intent. Although we acknowledge that authorial intent exists within frameworks of creation, text, culture, and tradition, we insist that there is meaning in the text. Multiple interpretations are legitimate, but there are boundaries inherent in the text – in this case, the Scriptures. The Scriptures, the *Besorah*, have meaning.

At the same time, the Bible itself does not claim completeness – that is, it makes no claim to explain everything, to answer every question, or to give us simple solutions to the vast variety of situations and problems we face in life. Apparently, we do not need a book that explains everything.⁶³

Our problem comes when we claim that our “directions” are not only adequate, but comprehensive and seamless. The drive to resolve ambiguity and live without loose ends is very powerful as we try to evade the bitter truth that we know far less than we would like to. I believe that Heschel can help us at this point. He wrote:

Jewish thinking and living can only be adequately understood in terms of a dialectic pattern, containing opposite or contrasted properties. As in a magnet, the ends of which have opposite magnetic qualities, these terms are opposite to one another and exemplify a polarity which lies at the very heart of Judaism, the

⁶² Eco, Umberto, “Vegetal and mineral memory: The future of books.” Lecture given at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina on November 1, 2003 in Alexandria, Egypt. AAI-Ahram Weekly Online : 20 - 26 November 2003 (Issue No. 665). <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/665/bo3.htm>.

⁶³ Even as Biblical affirmations are elaborated and developed within Judaism or other intentionally traditional religious communities (such as the various Orthodox Christianities), we will never arrive at the place where there is an answer to every question and an explanation for everything that happens under the sun.

polarity of ideas and events, of mitzvah and sin, of kavanah and deed, of regularity and spontaneity, of uniformity and individuality, of halacha and aggada, of law and inwardness, of love and fear... of this life and the life to come, of revelation and response, of insight and information... of man's quest for God and God in search of man. Even God's relation to the world is characterized by justice and mercy, providence and concealment, the promise of reward and the demand to serve Him for His sake. Taken abstractly, all these terms seem to be mutually exclusive, yet in actual living they involve each other; the separation of the two is fatal to both.⁶⁴

Heschel's teaching on polarity – especially when taken together with Max Kaddushin's understanding of the inter-relatedness of all these concepts⁶⁵ – is a powerful guide to Biblical and Jewish thought. It can deal with the apparent contradictions between individual and community, chosenness and equality. It places ambiguities and apparent contradictions within a context that avoids oversimplification while providing a reliable orientation for life and thought.

We should avoid presenting a *Besorah* that claims to solve all life's problems and tie up all the loose ends. Receiving Yeshua as Messiah does not make life transparent and the uncertainties and challenges of life fully resolvable. The Scriptures do not reduce life to simple formulas.

The Bible's inherent claim to correspond to reality may be compared with a friend's claim that he is giving me "good directions" to his house. If his directions are adequate – that is, *if they correspond to reality* – they will get me to his door. They are certainly "structurally incomplete" – they may not include the location of rest stops,

⁶⁴ Heschel, page 341.

⁶⁵ Kadushin, Max. *Organic Thinking: A Study in Rabbinic Thought*. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1938. and *The Rabbinic Mind*. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965.

restaurants, or a drug store to get ibuprofen if I get a headache. They do not answer every question I may have on the way.

Likewise, our underlying claim should be that the Scriptures and the *Besorah* correspond to reality. They form the basis for communal and personal understanding of the ways and desires of God. Acknowledging that the Scriptures and the *Besorah* are inherently “incomplete” in the above sense does *not* mean that we cannot assert the Scriptures’ authority and power. The Bible offers coherent perspectives on the issues of life. The *Besorah* is indeed good news of the Messiah, God speaking in the atoning person of his incarnate son. It is “the power of God for salvation.” It is able to change the course of life of individuals and communities. Eventually, it will be involved in the *geulah, the renewal of Israel, all humanity, and the cosmic order.*

What Messianic Judaism Has To Offer

I believe the gospel we have offered to our fellow Jews has been flawed because it has lacked the communal dimensions that are inherent in the Tanakh, in Jewish liturgy, in apostolic preaching, and in the Jewish view of redemption that we are discussing in this Forum. While we need to honor the many passionate and sincere men and women who, over the centuries, have loved us enough to dedicate their lives to share to the gospel with us, I believe it would be a tragic mistake *for us* to continue presenting the *Besorah* to Jews in the same way. Our fellow Jews need to hear that Yeshua is Messiah/Redeemer of the community, *Am Yisrael*, not only of individual Jews. They need to hear that to receive Yeshua means to deepen or return to their communal ties, commitments, and identity.

How then can we formulate a version of the Besorah that makes evident its importance for the entire Jewish world and the need for us to be passionately committed to it?

First, we must be saturated with the communal themes expressed in the Scriptures and in Jewish thought, especially in the liturgy. We need to be saturated with the Jewish communal language of redemption.

But we also need to move beyond a textual familiarity with Judaism to a live involvement in Jewish communal experience. As we do this *en masse*, such involvement will produce not the often feared “seduction into Rabbinic Judaism” but a healthy sense of community. This communal consciousness will affect the way we think and speak about and to the broader Jewish community.

When our thoughts and ways of expression are communal, when the Jewish view of redemption – saturated with Yeshua – is part of our normal orientation to life, we will be positioned to communicate the kind of *Besorah* we are talking about here. I am not suggesting that we wait until we reach perfection to make this *Besorah* known to our fellow Jews. But we need to be very aware that what we think in our inmost being and who we are experientially will be reflected in what we say. Insofar as we think individualistically, we will communicate an individualistic *Besorah*.

Neither do I suggest that we should approach our fellow Jews “loaded for bear.” When I go to Kinbar family events – Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, weddings, reunions – I don’t go looking for “open doors” to witness. I go as who I am – a Kinbar. I am also a Messianic

Jewish Kinbar, and so conversation sometimes goes in that direction. Because I am becoming more knowledgeable as a Jew, I am often asked questions about “what Judaism says” about one thing or another. But I will be a Kinbar, and continue to go to family events, and love my family, even if no other Kinbar ever receives Yeshua. That’s what love is.

Likewise, our involvement in the larger Jewish community should not be conditioned on “success.” We, as Messianic Jews, must “participate *with* the [entire] Jewish people in the history of God's election and covenant” without preconditions, whether or not we seem to be getting “results.” At the very root of it all, we should love our community, and every individual Jew, with a very extravagant and unconditional love.

As Messianic Jewish congregations we *must* begin to think and act communally. This begins with individuals, but must impact our congregations and ultimately characterize our movement. If our experience, our thinking, and our congregations remain individualistic and adrift from the broader Jewish community, then at best our community-oriented *Besorah* will be undermined and at worst we will be revealed as hypocrites.

As we begin to think and act more communally, without compromising or muting the centrality of Yeshua in redemption, we will give shape and substance to ***a clear Messianic Jewish understanding of the Besorah that makes evident its importance for the entire Jewish world and the need for us to be passionately committed to it.***

Appendix

The Language of Redemption in the Tanakh

There are three primary roots associated with redemption in the Tanakh, which I will represent by *ga'al*, *yasha*, and *padah*. I will use only a few examples from the Torah, Psalms, and Isaiah.

The Redemption from Egypt

Ex 6:6 Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will *deliver* you from their bondage. I will also redeem (*ga'alti*) you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.

Ex 14: 30 Thus the LORD saved (*yosha*) Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

Deut 7:8 ... the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed (*yif'd'kha*) you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

2 Sam 7: 23 And what one nation on the earth is like Your people Israel, whom God went to redeem (*lif'dot*) for Himself as a people and to make a name for Himself, and to do a great thing for You and awesome things for Your land, before Your people whom You have redeemed (*padita*) for Yourself from Egypt, from nations and their gods?

Ongoing Redemption

Ps 25:22 Redeem (*p'dei*) Israel, O God, out of all his troubles.

Ps 28:8-9 The LORD is their strength, and He is a saving (*y'shuot*) defense to His anointed. Save (*hoshiah*) Your people, and bless Your inheritance; be their shepherd also, and carry them forever.

Ps 78:35 ...the Most High God their Redeemer (*go'alam*)

Ps 107:1-2 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting. Let the redeemed (*g'u lei*) of the LORD say so, whom He has redeemed (*g'alam*) from the hand of the adversary,

Ps 130:7-8 O Israel, hope in the LORD; For with the LORD there is lovingkindness,
And with Him is abundant redemption (*f'dut*); and He will redeem
(*yif'dah*) Israel From all his iniquities.

Future Redemption

Ps 69: 36 For God will save (*yoshia*) Zion and build the cities of Judah, that they
may dwell there and possess it.

Is 25:8-9 He will swallow up death for all time, And the LORD God will wipe
tears away from all faces,... And it will be said in that day, "Behold, this is our
God for whom we have waited that He might save (*yoshienu*) us. This is the
LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.
(*y'shuato*)"

Is 45: 17 Israel has been saved (*nosha*) by the LORD With an everlasting salvation
(*t'shua*); You will not be put to shame or humiliated To all eternity.

Is 54:8 In an outburst of anger I hid My face from you for a moment; but with
everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your
Redeemer (*go'aleikh*).

Our three roots are also found interwoven in various Scriptures:

Yasha and Gaal

This relates to the redemption from Egypt.

Is 63: 9 In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved
them (*hoshiam*); in His love and in His mercy He redeemed (*g'alam*) them; and He
lifted them and carried them all the days of old.

Gaal and Fada

This passage links past and future redemption.

Is 51:10-11 Who made the depths of the sea a pathway for the redeemed (*g'ulim*)
to cross over? So the ransomed (*f'duyei*) of the LORD will return, and come with
joyful shouting to Zion; and everlasting joy will be on their heads. They will
obtain gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Yasha, Ga'al, and Fada

This passage is about the future redemption.

Is 35:4, 9-10 "Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance; the recompense of God will come, but He will save you (*yosha'akhem*) No lion will be there, nor will any vicious beast go up on it; these will not be found there. But the redeemed (*g'ulim*) will walk there, and the ransomed (*f'duyei*) of the LORD will return, and come with joyful shouting to Zion, with everlasting joy upon their heads. They will find gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.