

# Opening Address

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On behalf of Israel College of the Bible, I would like to welcome all of you to the first National Theological Forum hosted by ICB. We have gathered here over the course of a day and a half in order to invest our precious time in listening to six speakers, conduct a dignified dialogue, and, above all, come together as brethren devoted to the salvation of our people Israel for the glory of God our Father and Yeshua our king, here in the Holy Land.

Robert Alter, a literary critic, tells of an embarrassing moment which occurred in the seventies, at a large academic conference at the Hebrew University:

The famous Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai was present and the conference facilitator, a young American woman, who, to judge by her heavy American accent and faltering Hebrew, must have been a recent immigrant, stood up in front of the group, and, surveying the crowded aisles, announced: 'These sessions are strictly for those who have registration tags. I am very sorry but whoever has no tag will have to get out of this hall.' This is what she meant to say, but instead of 'ulam,' she said 'olam'! Her monitorial eye, scanning the front row, lighted on the first tag-less shirt. 'You there,' she told Amichai, 'get out of this world [olam] right now.' The poet rose, his face flushed with what must have been the pride of martyrdom. The room exploded with imploring cries: 'Yehuda, Yehuda, sit down!' ..."

I think that this story illustrates at least two important things which I want to mention here: 1). That we should be very careful not to judge our brothers or sisters, just because they may not be wearing the tag that shows they belong to our camp; and 2). That even if we use the correct word, it can be heard in the wrong way and that we have tremendous power to honor or to shame one another in a public session by the use of our words.

There is a well-known and fascinating story in the Talmud about a controversy between the Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, from which we can also learn something:

R. Abba Samuel said: For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting, "The law is in agreement with our views" and the latter contending, "The law is in agreement with our views." Then a *bat kol* (a voice from heaven) announced, *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim* "these and those are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel." (*b. Eruvin 13b*)

In the continuation of this story, the Sages understand that if this is so, how can it be that the halakhah is only according to Beit Hillel? In other words, if the words of Beit Shammai are also "words of the living God," why do they, too, not constitute the halakhah? The gemara explains that Beit Hillel gained the right to determine the halakhah because their adherents

were “kindly and modest, [and] they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so humble as to mention the words of Beit Shammai before their own.”

This story teaches us that honoring someone else’s opinion is a supreme value in the Jewish tradition reflected here in the Talmud, as well as in other Jewish texts, which preserve such incidents and texts for subsequent generations as an example of tolerance.

I am of the opinion that the Talmud is also a political document which reflects the foundational authority of one stream of Judaism in its day ... but that is not the topic before us tonight.

Let me quote the Sages yet again, this time from the midrash:

R. Simeon b. Gamliel said to Tabbai his servant: “Go and buy me good food in the market.” He went and bought him tongue. He said to him: “Go and buy me bad food in the market.” He went and bought him tongue. Said he to him: “What is this? When I told you to get good food you bought me tongue, and when I told you to get bad food you also bought me tongue!” He replied: “Good comes from it and bad comes from it. When the tongue is good there is nothing better, and when it is bad there is nothing worse.” (Lev.Rab. 33:1)

We find similar statements in Proverbs:

There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (12:18)

Death and life are in the power of the tongue. And those who love it will eat its fruit. (18:21)

In a book by R. Joseph Telushkin called *Words That Hurt, Words that Heal*, he writes:

Think about your own life. Unless you, or someone dear to you, have been the victim of terrible physical violence, chances are the worst pains you have suffered in life have come from words used cruelly—from ego-destroying criticism, excessive anger, sarcasm, public and private humiliation, hurtful nicknames, betrayal of secrets, rumors and malicious gossip ... We choose our clothes more careful than we choose our words, though what we say *about* and *to* others can define them indelibly. That is why ethical speech—speaking fairly of others, honestly about ourselves, and carefully to everyone—is so important. If we keep the power of words in the foreground of our consciousness, we will handle them as carefully as we would a loaded gun.<sup>1</sup>

In this Forum, we shall listen to speakers, converse about the material which has been presented and the issues raised, and take time for discussion during the breaks and over

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<sup>1</sup> J. Telushkin, *Words That Hurt, Words that Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* (NY: Harper, 1998), xviii, 4-5. I wish to thank my colleague David Rudolph, from whom I have “borrowed” these apposite citations (the midrash, scriptural verses, and this quotation) which he used in a paper delivered at the 2008 Borough Park Theological Symposium in which we both participated. Dr. Rudolph employed these quotations in an American context similar to our present Israeli, Hebrew-speaking forum. The paper may be accessed at: <http://www.boroughparksymposium.com/> under “papers.”

mealtimes. This Forum constitutes a golden opportunity to open a dialogue between the variety of opinions held by those within the body of the Messiah.

Let us remember that Yeshua's brother Ya'akov (James) warns us: "But let every one be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger." Yeshua himself said, "... whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say 'You fool,' shall be guilty *enough to go* into the hell of fire" (Mt. 5:22).

We can build something today, even from this modest beginning of a handful of people in this room, that can be of value to the Lord – something which we can pass on to the coming generation of believers in the Land. We must not miss this opportunity which the Lord is giving us here.

It is important to note that conversations over lunch and in your free time are no less important than the lectures to be given in this room. We have all come to address the subject of "Israeli Messianic Jewish identity." I have no doubt that not all of us understand this awkward definition in the same way, and I would venture to guess that some people have almost no understanding of what it means! But however we understand it, its intention is this: This is us! Whether we call ourselves Messianic Jews, or *hasidei* Yeshua, or any other designation, we are faced with the question: Who are we? How do we relate (or how are we related) to our people? To Judaism? To non-believing Jews in Israel and abroad? To Gentile believers in the Land – including our Arab brethren – and abroad? These are some of the questions, of course, which are linked to our topic, and I do not intend to attempt to answer them here. I merely wish to begin to define the context in which we speak when we discuss our identity as Jews, disciples of Yeshua, and Israelis.

When I use the term "Israeli" – without even getting into the question of "Jewish" and "Messianic" – we are already dealing with a multifaceted term: it includes Sabras and immigrants (primarily from the former Soviet Union, the United States, France, Ethiopia, and the rest of the Diaspora), since we have returned to our Land with many influences from our native countries.

We shall shortly begin to listen to the speakers who will deliver their presentations. Let me just add here that our principal source, that which testifies to us about the early community, is the New Testament – also known as the "Apostolic witness." The variety of voices within this apostolic witness exemplifies our need to listen, understand, and learn from one another.

A distinguished theologian, George B. Caird, once suggested that a good way to engage in NT theology is on the model of the "conference table." In other words, to gather together, as it

were, all the NT authors and allow them to discuss their different perspectives between themselves. We could sit near the table in order to listen to Paul speaking with Matthew, or James discussing an issue with Mark, etc. In Caird's own words:

To write a New Testament theology is to preside at a conference of faith and order. Around the table sit the authors of the New Testament, and it is the presider's task to engage them in a colloquium about theological matters which they themselves have placed on the agenda ... The chair [presider] is bound to influence the discussion by the questions it puts on the agenda and by the order in which it calls on the speakers ... the members of our conference are dead ... The study of the New Testament, like any other historical exercise, entails a descent into the world of the dead.<sup>2</sup>

Caird asserts that we can only know about the past through “the interrogation of witnesses,” who require a “sacrificial offering to bring them to life” – i.e., a historian. At the same time, however, “a scholar who is at home with Paul may not be equally at home with Hebrews, Revelation, or the Fourth Gospel.” Likewise, although the presider must try to “fit a face and personality to each of the members,” “some will inevitably stand out more than others. If Luke is greeted as an old friend, Matthew may appear a comparative stranger.” Moreover, “Everyone who regards the New Testament as authoritative has some preconceived notion, acknowledged or unacknowledged, about its unity; and it is therefore essential that from time to time the nature of that unity should be critically examined ... Even in ordinary conversation communication sometimes breaks down because we hear what we expect the other person to say instead of listening to what is being said ... [T]he ultimate test of a New Testament theology rests not in intellectual criteria but in the contribution it makes to the life of the Christian community.”<sup>3</sup>

Caird takes as an example the NT theme of unity: the “apostolic council” did not “draw up any creed or agreed statement of faith, nor did it even attempt to reach unanimity. The Jerusalem apostles, Paul tells us, ‘added nothing to me,’ not because there was nothing to add but because there was no need to add it. They had heard enough to satisfy them ... Peter and Paul were to go their own separate ways. But they could do this without any sense of radical division, because they had recognized that the same God was at work both in Peter's mission to the Jews and in Paul's mission to the Gentiles. On the basis of that recognition they were content to accept one another as colleagues and to shake hands on it.”<sup>4</sup>

I would like to suggest that we adopt Caird's model for writing theology, which is based on the procedures followed by the first community. In my opinion, the New Testament itself

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<sup>2</sup> G.B. Caird, *New Testament Theology* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-22.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23.

and the different perspectives proffered by its authors, should caution us against an exaggerated confidence in the monopoly of “one perspective of the truth on the basis of theological themes.” I am not speaking here about abandoning the central aspects of our faith (like throwing cargo off a ship to lighten its load), since the apostles were ready and willing to suffer and to die for these. We, likewise, need to contend for the faith which was “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). What I am suggesting, on the analogy of the model presented above, is that the different understandings held by Paul and the Jerusalem apostles provide us with a model of dialogue, just as the New Testament does in its entirety.

In conclusion, since all of us here acknowledge the authority of Scripture in our lives, I suggest that we also remember during this Forum the model presented to us by the first community and endeavor to act according to its principles. In my opinion, we have a mandate and a responsibility to pass this on to the coming generation.

Although the New Testament speaks in different voices, its message concerning Yeshua and salvation in his name, together with God’s plan for Israel and the nations, is unanimous. The apostles established a unity which changed the whole world. My hope for this Forum is far more modest than the models of which I have spoken above. If we can spend tonight and tomorrow together truly listening to and conversing with one another, and not merely speaking past one another, I believe that we can set up a paradigm for the coming years which will strengthen our ties and broaden our perspectives. Ultimately, the outcome of such dignified dialogue will establish a model for the younger generation, leading them to seek to change, to make a contribution, and to influence our movement.

I am not intending to draw a rosy picture of existing circumstances. We all know that there are principles of faith which both Paul and ourselves should be willing to defend when they come under attack. I do wish to claim, however, that we must be “quick to listen and slow to speak.” Before we commence discussions amongst ourselves, we must concur that our first job is to listen and to ensure that we have properly understood what is being said.

Let me conclude with another example from the Sages, who warn that humiliating someone in public constitutes a very severe transgression. When we open up the Forum to the panel in which we shall discuss the issues raised by the speakers, let us endeavor to respect one another even when we violently disagree. Let us take this opportunity to make an effort to understand and acknowledge – as the apostles did at the Jerusalem council – that it is possible to understand and preach the gospel in different ways because the same God is working through all of us. If this is true, then how much more should it be possible to understand the first subject we have chosen to discuss this year – “Israeli Messianic Jewish identity” – and to

leave tomorrow afternoon with something precious: a greater understanding of our brothers, and the knowledge that we have honored the Lord's presence in our midst as his Body.

Many battles lie ahead of us. We shall be wise to unite our forces for these conflicts rather than warring unnecessarily amongst ourselves, even if we inevitably come under some "friendly fire." Let us strive to stand before the Lord with a clear conscience, knowing that we have worked together for unity in order that Yeshua's name may be glorified in Israel through one voice made up of many witnesses.