MASHLACH

Today there is a lot of discussion in the Messianic Jewish community about demographics, specifically the challenge of synagogues with Jewish minorities and Gentile majorities. Where do we turn for guidance on this subject? I would like to suggest that Paul’s letter to the congregation in Rome provides us with a *davar davar al-ofnav* (a word fifty spoken’ [Prov 25:11]) and points us in the right direction.

Who planted the congregation in Rome? Luke tells us that “visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,” witnessed the great outpouring of the Ruach (Spirit) on the day of Shavuot. Claudius “issued a decree expelling all the Jews from Rome” (Acts 18:2). Suddenly, the Messianic Jewish congregation in Rome had a demographic reshaping. The emperor needed to be kept in view. If one is emphatic about the distinction between Jew and Gentile, both—distinction and unity. Bilateral ecclesiology eclipses the other in importance, we destroy the teachings of God (bilateral ethics). Both need to be kept in view. If one is emphasized to the exclusion of the other, if one eclipse the other in importance, we destroy both—distinction and unity. Bilateral ecclesiology can only flourish in the life of a community and lead to mutual blessing if bilateral ethics are firmly in place.

For five years, the community was led by Gentiles and composed entirely of Gentiles. Then in 54 C.E., Claudius died and the Jews returned to Rome. Imagine how much had changed in their absence. It is against this historical backdrop that Paul wrote his letter to the congregation in Rome two years later (56–57 C.E.). By this time, the community had a Gentile majority, a Jewish minority and no shortage of Jew-Gentile problems.

We can learn a great deal from the exhortations and advice that Paul offers in his letter. In future columns, I will share some of the ethical principles that he introduces to bring shalom to the congregation in Rome, and I will refer to these principles as “bilateral ethics.” In the present column, I would like you to leave with a small comment on Paul’s overall theological perspective in Romans.

Paul believed that the distinction between Jew and Gentile remained by God’s design in the world. He viewed Jewish and Gentile identity as a matter of calling (Rom 11:11, 29; cf. 1 Cor 7:17–20). I refer to this perspective, and its communal implications, as “bilateral ecclesiology.”

On the one hand, our community has to emphasize as Paul did the continuing distinction between Jew and Gentile in the family of God (bilateral ecclesiology). On the other hand, we have to treat one another as children of God in accordance with the teachings of God (bilateral ethics). Both need to be kept in view. If one is emphasized to the exclusion of the other, if one eclipse the other in importance, we destroy both—distinction and unity. Bilateral ecclesiology can only flourish in the life of a community and lead to mutual blessing if bilateral ethics are firmly in place.

Why is there so much interest in this unlikely capitol city? Unlike most capitols cities that are by a major river, lake, or transportation center, Jerusalem sits on a number of hills in a relatively arid part of the country. So why the attention on this city? This is the city where Hashem has chosen to place his dwelling. Here, he commanded Israel to come up to and worship him. This is the place where Isaac was bound, both Temples stood, Yeshua worshiped, died and was resurrected. The city is a promised focal point in the ages to come. Jerusalem will be a cup of trembling to all that will touch it (cf. Zech 12:2).

In the Siddur, we end each service with the Aleinu. In this prayer we thank the Almighty for choosing us, the Jewish people, as a distinct people, from among the nations and then we put our hope in Hashem and declare: “that all humanity will call upon Your Name, to turn all the earth’s wicked toward You. All the world’s inhabitants will recognize and know that to

You every knee should bend, every tongue should swear.” Ten from the nations will grab a hold of the *tzizit* of a Jew and come to worship Hashem with us in Jerusalem! The plans of the nations for Jerusalem are only increasing. Some of these ideas are detached from reality or downright scary for the future of Israel. Thankfully, Hashem has a much better plan. The nations will come to worship the Holy One of Israel in this place. This is the city from which true peace will be extended to the nations through the Sar Shalom—the Prince of Peace!