

# Indigenous Expressions of Biblical Faith

by Gavriel Gefen

**T**he Lord God of Israel created all humankind in His own image. He separated us into different languages and dispersed us throughout the world. Our God gave to each people the knowledge and wisdom needed to survive in each place. His hand has always been present in each of our histories.

No people are without God. They may not know Him, and they may not serve Him, but He is still in their midst. Most basic expressions of life and faith are God-given. We may not use them properly, or honor Him with them as we were intended to, but that does not mean they are inherently ungodly or unbiblical. It simply means we have misused them.

Every people and place has distinct characteristics with distinct corresponding expressions. Our Creator made us and these places for His glory. The whole earth is full of His glory. He longs to be served and worshipped by us, in and through His creation.

## *Separation by Language and Location*

Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Gen 11:1-9)<sup>1</sup>

A few generations after Noah and the flood, all mankind was still united as one people with one language. Within the context of uniformity, that one people came together to build a tower and to make a name to glorify themselves rather than God. They sought to secure their unity around a man-made edifice rather

This article originally appeared in *Kesher: A Journal of Messianic Judaism*, Issue 21, Summer/Fall 2006 ([www.kesherjournal.com](http://www.kesherjournal.com)). Reprinted, in a slightly revised form here, with permission.

---

*Gavriel Gefen is the founding director of Keren HaShlichut, an Israeli association of Messianic Jewish emissaries serving in numerous nations around the world, in particular among indigenous peoples. Gavriel also leads Congregation Hasdei HaShem (Chasday HaShem) in Jerusalem.*

than Him. We are told that the Lord saw where this would lead them, and intervened to prevent it. He then separated humankind into different peoples with different languages, and scattered us abroad across the face of the earth.

Even so, this was not meant as a punishment for man's failure. Remember that, following the flood, Noah and his sons were commanded to fill the earth (Gen. 9:1). So, this dispersion of mankind across the earth was God's intent. It was part of His plan, and not a punishment for sin.

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:9-10)

In Genesis, we see the Lord dividing humanity into different peoples with different languages, and scattering us around the world. In Revelation, we see Him eventually bringing us all back together united in Him and worshipping Him as one, yet remaining distinctly the unique peoples He created us to be and having the separate languages He divided us into.

So, the Lord chose to scatter us around the world. And, as we dispersed, we came to dwell in distinctly different regions of the earth. Some came to live in places that were very hot and others in places that were very cold. Some came to live in places that were very wet and others dry. Some settled in areas of high elevation and others in areas that were *at* or even *below* sea level. Some came to dwell in regions near the equator where there are twelve hours of light and twelve hours of darkness consistently year round. Others came to dwell in regions far from the equator where seasons greatly vary, even to the extreme that the sun does not rise or set for weeks at a time. The natural environments in these

places, the weather and the plant and animal life, all require very different knowledge and skills in order to survive. Yet, as our Creator brought each people group to the place that He was entrusting to them as His stewards, He gave them the knowledge and wisdom needed to live there.

As we came to dwell in our own places and live separately, each people group lived out different histories. Some of us dwelt in the vicinity of other peoples, fell into disagreement, fighting for centuries, causing much



bloodshed and great suffering. Others lived near people they always got along with, living peaceably for centuries. Some groups had constant interaction with others while other peoples lived in complete isolation. Most peoples experienced natural disasters—devastating floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and great fires. Some experienced them frequently and others never.

Each people remembered the high points and low points in their histories, the best times and worst times. They told their children about them. We used the stories of our histories to teach basic principles of life to our children. We came to remember the best and worst individuals among us, honoring some and despising others. We honored the memory of those individuals to whom God had given wisdom as to how to endure and abound in our environments, and those who led us to various successes and victories.

In the course of living in extremely diverse environments and dissimilar histories, we developed distinct celebrations for the seasons in each of our lands. Unique life circumstances led us to mark human life-cycle events in ways that express the distinct characteristics of the heritage we share with our own people.

The children of Israel were also brought to a land. We, the Jewish people, were entrusted with a place in the earth that had been promised through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses, who brought us back to this land, was given understandings of life and expressions of faith to teach us. These understandings and expressions were particularly relevant to this place that came to be called after our father Israel. The customs and traditions Moses imparted were also directly related to the collective history of our people. We were not only given these expressions but in fact commanded to uphold them.

### *Israel's Feasts of Ascent*

Among the feasts of Israel are the three Feasts of Ascent—*Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Weeks, Pentecost), and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles). These are the central feasts during which the people of Israel were commanded to ascend up to the Temple in Jerusalem. Each of these three feasts is integrally linked to our specific history as the people of Israel, and to the agricultural cycle of the Land of Israel in which we live. All three feasts are inseparable from our history and our land.

The main observance of the three feasts today is to remember and to teach our children. Passover is a time of remembrance of our deliverance from slavery in Egypt. We remember the Passover lamb, the blood on the doorposts, and the death of the first-born sons. We remember how we were delivered and we teach our children.

Fifty days later, *Shavuot* (Weeks, Pentecost) is a time of remembrance of our God meeting us at Sinai. He gave us His Word there, and empowered

us through covenant to create a new future in relationship with Him.

*Sukkot* (Tabernacles) is a time of remembrance of the forty years we wandered in the wilderness without a land, and lived in temporary dwellings. We celebrate not only that the Lord brought us into the Land and enabled us to build more permanent dwellings, but also that He chose a resting place for Himself in this Land and came to dwell among us. His tangible Divine Presence inhabited the fixed Temple that was built to replace the transient Tabernacle.

The three Feasts of Ascent are also related to the agricultural cycle of the Land of Israel. *Pesach* is a spring festival that marks the beginning of the harvest cycle. The unleavened bread that we eat during Passover is made of wheat from a previous harvest. Only after this is a sickle put to the first grain, and the first sheaf is offered to the Lord during this feast of unleavened bread, two days after the Passover meal.

Fifty days later, *Shavuot* is a celebration of the completion of the first stage of the harvest. It is the Feast of First-fruits during which the first loaves of bread made of grain from the new harvest are offered to the Lord.

In the autumn, *Sukkot* is a celebration of the completion of the harvest of all things. It is the Feast of the Ingathering, after everything has been brought in from the fields.

As with Israel, other peoples also have feasts which are integrally linked to their specific histories and to the lands in which they live. They also remember their histories and teach their children. They also mark the seasons of the year and of the harvests of the places in which they live. And, they should continue to do so. Those who know and serve the One God and Father of us all, and who follow His Son, should continue to commemorate the life and land of their people. They should celebrate their successes and they should not forget their fail-

**H**e not only releases the nations from any obligation, but even cautions them against embracing these things of Israel.

ings. They should remember the hand of God in their histories.

When an indigenous tribal man or woman in the tropical rainforests of the Amazon jungle comes to faith in Yeshua, he/she does not suddenly lose their history. He is not suddenly transported to the Middle East to live in a new land. Believers remain people of the rainforest, with a way of life that is relevant to that place and to the lived-out story of their people. Do any of us honestly think that they should slash-and-burn areas of rainforest in order to start growing grain in preparation for Israel's cycle of the harvest? Of course not. Yet, we should recognize and affirm the importance of them as believers continuing to honor their land and history together with their people.

Israel's three Feasts of Ascent all look forward to a future fullness in the New Covenant that is shared by the nations. During *Pesach*, Yeshua became our Passover Lamb. During *Shavuot*, the first Emissaries (Apostles) were empowered by the Holy Spirit of God to go out into the fields of harvest of the world. *Sukkot* speaks of a time yet to come in the future of the completion of the harvest—of the ingathering of the nations.

There is no place in Scripture where the nations are commanded to celebrate the Feasts of Israel. There is one passage in the book of the prophet Zechariah (14:16-19) that speaks of a time in the Last Days when all nations of the earth are to be represented each year in Jerusalem during the time of *Sukkot*. Even that passage does not say that the nations at that time are to observe *Sukkot*, only that each nation is to be represented. Some people believe that the importance of all nations in that day being represented in Jerusalem

is to express the fullness of the ingathering of the nations.

New believers are adopted and "grafted" into the family of faith that was established through Abraham. In being adopted into this commonwealth, there is a rich spiritual heritage that every believer inherits. This heritage includes the message of God's Word as first given to humankind through Israel. This also includes many of the principles of redemption as exemplified and foreshadowed in the Feasts of Israel.

Those in the nations who wish to share in the celebrations of Israel's feasts and traditions are welcome to, but not required to. They have the freedom to do so if they should so choose, but Paul, Emissary to the Gentiles, clearly taught against any obligation for them to do these things. He not only releases the nations from any obligation, but even cautions them against embracing these things of Israel. There is certainly much that one can learn from experiencing some of these celebrations. But, if one should choose to do this regularly, they should be careful not to allow these expressions and traditions to replace the expressions of life of their own people among whom they live. They should still honor their own cultural heritage.

### *Diversity of Expressions of Life*

What is culture? It is the language we speak. It is music and dance. It is the clothes we wear and the food we eat. Culture is the history that we have in common with our people. It is celebrations of the year, the seasons, and of nature. It is the way we share life-cycle events with our family and loved ones. It is the land that a people steward together. These are the common points of reference through which a people communicate with one another. All of these things make up a culture.

They are the framework within which members of a tribe or nation share their lives.

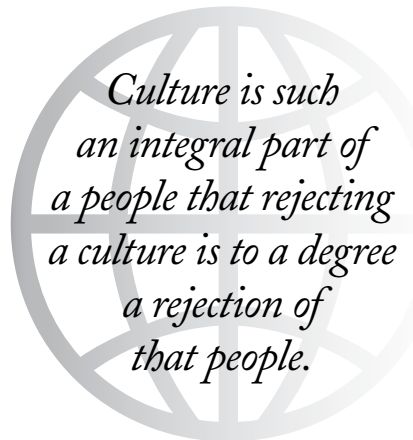
All mankind is created in the image of God. There is something of the Creator Himself imprinted on the spirit, soul, and body of every human being. As humanity longs for her Creator, there is something of the way in which that is expressed that inherently comes from Him. There is a yearning within each one of us that reaches back to Him who is Our Source.

All peoples descend from Noah. After the Flood, his sons repopulated the earth and fathered us all. Every race shares this same forefather who knew and served the One God and Creator of us all. As the various cultures of the world have developed, they have stemmed out of that common origin. Most cultures have a traditional belief in a Creator who created the world. Many cultures have a story of a great flood. As colorful and diverse as all cultures are, there are still common threads that express our shared beginning and ultimately a shared future.

All cultures have strengths and weaknesses. All cultures are also tainted by the sinfulness of humanity. For example, even many of the cultural expressions mandated to Israel in Scripture have been stained over time by pride and presumption. Yet, when we discover imperfections in our cultures, the response should not be to reject everything but to seek to cleanse and redeem what has been defiled. We should seek to restore to proper use those things that have been misused, rather than throw them away. We should also seek to discover those unique redemptive strengths within each of our cultures of which we may have neglected to make full use.

Most, if not all, cultures have musical instruments. They are used in singing stories of life and songs of love. Some of them are also used for worship and religious ceremonies. When an instrument is crafted that is going to be used

in ceremonies, it is common for the craftsman to dedicate the instrument in some way either to the spirits they have believed in (including idols, ancestors, and multiple gods) or to their understanding of the Creator. When someone from this background comes to faith in Yeshua, they should continue to make music with the instruments of their people. They should craft a new drum or flute, or whatever it is they play, and dedicate it to the Lord. In so doing, they may continue to call Him the Creator, but it is with a new understanding of who the Creator is.



For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather

than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Rom 1:18-25)

There are many believers among tribal groups who hand-make new instruments or the traditional garments of their people and dedicate them to Yeshua. Traditional objects that were originally crafted to bring honor to an ancestor, a spirit, or an idol are now crafted to bring honor to the God of Israel. Something that may have once been used to deify creation rather than the Creator is now restored to its proper use. When someone plays one of these instruments unto the Lord, the Lord looks at the heart of the musician and not the form of the instrument. Just because a particular kind of drum may have been used for the wrong purpose or directed in its use toward the wrong being does not make it inherently ungodly and unbiblical. It means it has been misused. We should seek to see it restored to a proper, godly, and “biblical” use; one not contrary to Scripture.

When new followers of Yeshua are taught to reject the cultural heritage of their people, something very precious is stolen from them. In rejecting those expressions of shared life, they marginalize themselves within their own communities and become less relevant to those around them. They lose some of the most basic tools of communication through which their people express love, honor, and respect for one another. They make themselves unable to effectively communicate both their own love and God’s love to their family and loved ones. Culture is such an integral part of a people that rejecting a culture is to a degree a rejection of that people.

When a Jewish man or woman embraces the New Covenant in Yeshua, they do not cease being Jewish. They also do not suddenly morph into being 50% Jewish and 50% Messianic (follower of the Messiah, or Christ). They remain 100% Jewish and should now also become 100% Messianic.

When a Maori man or woman in Aotearoa (New Zealand) is reborn in

the Messiah Yeshua, she or he does not cease to be Maori, nor morph into being 50% Maori and 50% Messianic (Christian). She remains 100% Maori and should now also simultaneously become 100% a follower of the Messiah. There is no contradiction.

I recently heard a Mohawk friend tell of being confronted by someone who was upset by his use of Mohawk culture as a Christian. He was challenged, "How can being Mohawk make you a better Christian?" He replied that the issue was better expressed, "How can Jesus make me a better Mohawk?"

### *The Council of Jerusalem*

In the book of Acts we read of a dispute that arose among the first Emissaries. They had begun to hear of Gentiles embracing biblical faith and following Yeshua, without undergoing circumcision. The reports claimed that these new believers had been immersed in water (baptized) and even filled with the Holy Spirit. The leaders in Jerusalem could not imagine it. What? Uncircumcised Gentiles following Yeshua and filled with the Holy Spirit? How could it be? So, the question arose, "Is it possible for a Gentile to be saved without first becoming a Jew?"

Acts 15 tells of the gathering that convened in Jerusalem in order for the Emissaries/Apostles to discuss this matter. As they spoke, prayed, and sought the Lord together, they came to a unity of understanding that it was not necessary for Gentiles to become Jewish in order to be reconciled to God. They began to see that the message of redemption was for all humans. Paul confirms in his writings that it is in fact preferable that Gentiles remain as they were called, and not attempt to become Jews.

The spreading of the Good News among the nations began to accelerate. Within two generations, the majority of believers in Yeshua were non-Jews. A generation or two after that, not only the majority of believers but also the majority of believing leaders in the world were non-Jews. As the believing

**M**any Gentile church leaders began to assert their independence from the Jewish origins of the Church and to teach that they had replaced Israel.

community grew among the Gentiles, its expressions of faith became less Jewish, such as the Emissaries in Acts 15 had come to understand.

Over time, not only did the expressions of the Church become less Jewish, but many Gentile church leaders began to assert their independence from the Jewish origins of the Church and to teach that they had replaced Israel. During the first three hundred years of Church history, there were dozens of church councils and synods. These were gatherings of leaders convened for the purpose of discussing, deciding, and decreeing Church doctrine and practice. Some gatherings were only regional, for deciding local disagreements. Other councils included the participation of credible authoritative leaders from multiple regions and/or multiple Christian expressions. It wasn't until 325 AD the first council was convened that included credible authoritative leaders from every organized church movement and every region, involving the participation of 318 bishops.

The Council of Nicea convened by the emperor Constantine in 325 AD became the first of what came to be known as the seven Ecumenical Councils. Spanning a period of 462 years, both the first and seventh councils were convened at Nicea. The canon law decreed in these councils became the foundation of Church doctrine that nearly every Christian movement has built upon. Even the most protestant of Protestant churches today still base much of their theology and practice on these councils.

At the conclusion of the first Council of Nicea, Constantine wrote a letter of introduction to accompany the copied lists of canon that were to be distributed by the departing church leaders. In this letter, Constantine declared

that the Church needed to separate from all dealings and associations with the Jewish people. He then proposed that the celebration of the Resurrection of Yeshua should be completely and universally separated from Passover.

We ought not, therefore, to have anything in common with the Jews, for the Savior has shown us another way... [W]e desire, dearest brethren, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews... How, then, could we follow these Jews, who are most certainly blinded by error?... But even if this were not so, it would still be your duty not to tarnish your soul by communications with such wicked people [the Jews]... [I]t is our duty not to have anything in common with the murderers of our Lord... and that we should have nothing in common with the Jews... By the unanimous judgment of all, it has been decided that the most holy festival of Easter should be everywhere celebrated on one and the same day, and it is not seemly that in so holy a thing there should be any division. As this is the state of the case, accept joyfully the divine favor, and this truly divine command; for all which takes place in assemblies of the bishops ought to be regarded as proceeding from the will of God... [T]he divine power has made use of our instrumentality for destroying the evil designs of the devil.<sup>2</sup>

These kinds of statements against the Jewish people had been made before at previous councils. But, it was with the conclusion of this first ecumenical council that one of these decrees finally held authority over the entire organized Church.

### *New Expressions of the Faith*

Thus, the annual remembrance of the Resurrection of Yeshua became linked with a spring festival that already existed in Asia Minor. It was a feast that included blood sacrifice to the

goddess Ishtar, from which comes the name Easter. This was a feast of fertility that celebrated the new life of springtime. It included the use of symbols representing new life, such as eggs, chicks, and bunny rabbits. As this feast began to be celebrated by Christians as a remembrance of Yeshua's resurrection, blood sacrifice was done away with and the symbols of new life came to represent the new life that we have in the Messiah.

It was not wrong for the non-Jewish Christians of Asia Minor and Southeastern Europe to redeem their own existing feast as a celebration of Yeshua's resurrection. The sin of Constantine was in his intention of breaking relationship with and separating from the Jewish people. When true believing Christians in Europe today celebrate Easter, they are not worshipping idols. They are celebrating the Resurrection of the Son of God. It is good, beautiful, and holy—a redeemed expression of biblical faith.

At the point of this official breaking of relationship with the Jewish people, the question facing Church leaders concerning Jews became basically, "Is it possible for a Jew to be saved without first becoming a Gentile?" Throughout most of Church history, the response to that question has been that it is not possible for a Jewish person to be in relationship with God without first forsaking their Jewish heritage and community, and embracing these new expressions in the Church. The problem here is not the Church's new expressions of faith but the rejection of Jewish expressions for Jewish believers, and the cursing of the Jewish people.

As Christianity spread into Northern Europe, it arrived in a region with long dark winters and long sunny summers. The two main festivals of the year there were mid-summer and mid-winter. Throughout Scandinavia, the mid-winter festival was named after the Viking god Jul (Yule). It was a feast that included blood sacrifice to Jul. Immediately following the shortest day of the year, the people would cut

down an evergreen tree and bring it into their home to celebrate the passing of the darkest day of winter and the soon return of the sun and all of the greenery that comes with it (birth of the sun). They would sacrifice a pig on the altar to Jul and bring the meat of the sacrifice into their home and eat it. As with Easter, this feast was given new meaning. It was transformed into a celebration of the birth of Yeshua.

As the Good News of Yeshua advanced across Europe it entered the cultures of the people. They were not given, as it were, a "potted plant" of faith. Rather,



the seed of the message was planted in the "soil" of their own unique cultures. New life was born among them. It took root in new soil and flourished.

Here again, when true believing Christians in Europe today celebrate Christmas or Easter, they are not worshipping idols. They are commemorating the birth of Yeshua the Son of God. It is a beautiful redeemed expression of biblical faith.

The Europeans soon began taking that message to Africa and Asia, but in so doing failed to follow the example of the first Emissaries. They took their own cultures with them, and imposed them upon those they were sent to. They declared, "Your cultures are pagan. You need God's culture. You need our culture." And they proceeded to teach the practices of their own culture. This included some of the redeemed expressions of European culture—redeemed and yet still foreign

and irrelevant (such as the mid-winter festival of Christmas and the spring festival of Easter). These foreign practices also often included less-than-redeemed expressions of European culture. One problem was that cultural expressions became confused with the Gospel itself. Those to whom the Good News was being presented were all too often so blinded by the cultural baggage within which the message was packaged that they were unable to discern the message. Of course, another major problem was the way Europeans all too often treated those they went to was not "Good News." Their sinful actions against the hearers spoke louder than their words.

### *Honoring Diversity*

I heard of a Bible translator working in Southeast Asia. He was translating the New Testament into the language of a tribal group living in a delta region. Each year during the rainy season, the river would rise and the whole area would flood. The people of this tribe built their houses up on stilts so that when it flooded the water would simply pass under their houses.

As the translator came to Matthew 7, he faced a difficult question. At the end of the chapter it speaks of a wise man who built his house on a rock and a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The problem was that in this culture if you build your house on a rock, the flood waters will wash it away. A wise man in this tribe builds his house on the sand, because he can sink the poles down deep into it and make his house secure.

The translator wasn't sure how to translate it. Should he say, "A wise man built his house on the sand" and "a foolish man built his house on a rock"? Well, that's not faithful to the text. So, he thought some more. Then he found the solution. He translated it as, "A wise man built his house on a good foundation..." and "A foolish man built his house on a bad foundation." This was faithful to the text, and it also allowed the people to interpret

it for themselves. The translator had found a way to transmit the truth of the text in a way that was relevant to how they live.

Many missionaries would have been dogmatic in their insistence about the wise man having to build on a rock. They would have said, "My Bible says..." and "My God is the same yesterday, today, and forever." And, "My God is not a liar." Unlike the above Bible translator, they would have failed to communicate the truth of the passage to those to whom they were sent.

There is great value in honoring the traditions of our fathers. One should uphold them so long as those traditions do not contradict the principles of Scripture. They may be extra-biblical, in addition to Scripture, just as long as they are not contrary to its principles. The practices may look and be different, as long as they uphold the same principles.

Chapter 35 of the book of Jeremiah the prophet gives a powerful example of a family who upheld the commandment of their father, even in the face of being ordered to do otherwise by the prophet Jeremiah while on the grounds of the Temple. Neither the man nor the place intimidated them. The Lord then spoke to them through Jeremiah,

And Jeremiah said to the house of the Rechabites, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Because you have obeyed the commandment of Jonadab your father, and kept all his precepts and done according to all that he commanded you, therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not lack a man to stand before Me forever.'" (Jer 35:18b-19)

The things Jonadab had commanded his sons and descendants to do were not biblical requirements. They were extra-biblical. Yet, the Lord greatly honored those descendants for upholding the commandments of their father.

I was once invited by a Christian pastor to go fishing on a Jewish holiday. I declined and said it was one of my

**I**n bringing the message of redemption to others, have we taught them to honor their fathers? Or, have we possibly taught them to dishonor their fathers?

holidays. He laughed and suggested I make an exception. I told him that the holiday was important to me, and that I didn't want to miss it. He then began to prod me and say that if I couldn't make an exception in order to go fishing that I was really hung-up on legalism. I responded by asking if he celebrates Christmas.

"Of course I do," he responded.

I then asked if he had ever made an exception and skipped it. He looked puzzled and said, "No."

I said, "You mean to tell me you've celebrated Christmas every year of your life, without making one single exception?"

He answered, "Well, yeah."

"Whoa", I said, "It sure sounds like bondage to me."

Even more puzzled, he just looked at me. Then I continued, "But it isn't, is it?"

"No", he said.

I went on, "It's probably your favorite holiday. You probably really look forward to it?"

"Uhuh."

"It's a time of year when your family gets together and you give each other gifts. You express your love and God's love to your friends and relatives. All other things are put aside, and you just enjoy being together. You laugh, joke, tell stories, sing songs, and hear the latest about each others lives. You share together in the event and in all of the special things that are part of that celebration. And, you probably take time together to give thanks to God."

"Yeah."

"Well", I said, "My holidays are the same for me. They are not a burden, but a blessing. I keep them because they are meaningful and I enjoy them, and not because I am forced."

Do we honor the traditions of our fathers? Do we respect other peoples' traditions as passed down to them by their fathers? In bringing the message of redemption to others, have we taught them to honor their fathers? Or, have we possibly taught them to dishonor their fathers?

### *Embodying the Redemption of Our People and Land*

Creation is in a state of brokenness. Humankind has broken relationship with her Creator and has defiled the land she was given to steward. The plan of redemption is for our Creator to restore creation to Himself. The Creator communicated that plan to Israel through the cultural heritage He gave to us. His Son Yeshua lived among us within that heritage and fully embodied the message. Yeshua honored the Land in which He was born, and He honored the people among whom He lived. The message became flesh and dwelt among us as one of us.

As the first called-out nation of messengers, Israel was set apart for a purpose that is not yet complete. It remains her destiny. She is still called-out to carry that message of redemption.

Faithfully upholding our Jewish cultural heritage as Messianic Jews links us to our original and ultimate national purpose and calling. Failing to keep it does not separate us from God, but does put us outside the community that has faithfully served the purpose of preserving us as a people. Examples of traditions that have served to preserve us as a distinct people during centuries of exile are *Shabbat* (the Sabbath) and *kasbrut* (dietary guidelines). More than we kept these two traditions, they kept us—preserved us. They distinguished us from the people among whom we lived during our

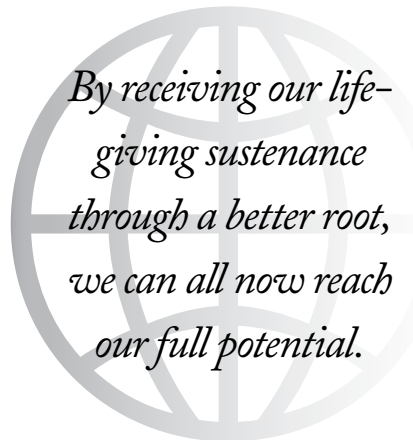
exile. The Lord used these things to preserve us for His purposes.

There are a number of well-established Jewish communities in the Southern Hemisphere. Below the equator the seasons of the year are the inverse of when they take place in the Northern Hemisphere. During springtime in the Northern Hemisphere it is autumn in the Southern Hemisphere. So, as the Jewish communities in the South celebrate the Feasts of Israel according to the Hebrew calendar and the seasons of Israel, they are actually marking them in the opposite seasons of when they are observed in Israel. Jews in New Zealand celebrate the spring festival of *Pesach* during the harvest season of the land of their exile. They celebrate the harvest festival of *Sukkot* in the springtime of the land of their exile. In so doing, they express their connection to both their history and their future in the Land of Israel. They honor their fathers. They identify with their communal Jewish history and also a destiny. They express that they are not of the land they are presently in.

To teach Maori people that they must also now keep the Feasts of Israel would serve to dishonor their fathers and their land. It would clash with who they are and where they live. It makes sense for the Jewish community in exile there to uphold their traditions as a connection to their past and future. But, it would be out of place to impose that on the other communities of New Zealand. If others wish to participate in marking those times, they are welcome. But, they certainly do not have to. They are free to choose to share in these traditions as a means of identifying with the Jewish people, or simply as a learning experience. But, it would be a bit out of place for them to simply appropriate these expressions as their own. They would do better to hold to the expressions of their own land and history—to honor their land and their own fathers.

In Romans 11, Paul the Emissary uses the analogy of Gentile followers of Yeshua being as branches cut from a wild olive tree and grafted into a

cultivated olive tree. When branches from multiple olive trees are cut and grafted into one new tree, they each continue to produce the same variety of olives as the tree they came from, with their own unique color and flavor. The difference is that those branches now begin to receive their life-giving sustenance from a new root. If that root is a stronger and better root, the branches will now be able to produce fruit to their full potential. It will still be the same unique fruit, but it will be of a higher quality and there will be a lot more of it.



The root of the cultivated olive tree of Romans 11 is not the Jewish community. It is Yeshua Himself. He is our root through whom we receive our life-giving sustenance. Those believers in the nations who are “grafted in” now receive their life-giving sustenance through Yeshua. This olive tree that we are all now part of is not a tree with only one kind of olive. It is a tree of grafted branches from many trees. It is a tree of many varieties of olives with different colors, flavors, textures, and scents. Some are better for making oil and others for pickling. They are all prepared and served differently. By receiving our life-giving sustenance through a better root, we can all now reach our full potential. Our respective fruit is still unique, but the yield is now much greater and of a higher quality.

The worldwide Body of Messiah should be a symphony of colors and flavors and sounds. We are one in the Lord, but still diverse. Unity is not

uniformity. We should celebrate the diversity of our peoples as we each seek to be conformed to the image of God’s Son, who was the message lived out. May we each live out the message in the midst of the people among whom we live as fully engaged members of our communities. May we seek to see the message lived out among other peoples in ways that speak to who they are and where they live. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>All Scripture is taken from New King James Version.

<sup>2</sup>*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. XIV: The Seven Ecumenical Councils.* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980.

Author’s contact information:

Gavriel Gefen  
P.O. Box 1833  
Jerusalem, 91017 ISRAEL

Tel. +972-2-5671951  
Fax +972-2-5617536  
E-mail: [gavriel@shlichut.com](mailto:gavriel@shlichut.com)  
Web site: [www.shlichut.com](http://www.shlichut.com)  
[www.wcgip.org](http://www.wcgip.org)