

Building on the Past, Looking Toward the Future

LCJE – Jerusalem, 2015

When I was given this title for the message I have been asked to deliver this evening I had to smile. I had to smile because it is a matter of concern I've been thinking about for much of my career. So I hope you don't mind if I'm a bit autobiographical in my message today. I intend to talk about some of my own personal experiences with this theme, then look briefly at this text of scripture drawing some applications for us as the LCJE.

1. My Own Experience

First of all my own life story has components of this theme woven into its very fabric. Some of you already know that I come from five generations of Messianic Jews on my mother's side. My great great grandfather was the chief rabbi of the Hasidim of Zhitomer in Ukraine. Without going in great detail into the story, the rabbi's daughter was the first in my family to become a believer in Jesus. She came to faith through the witness of her fiancé Julius Finestone. Esther eventually led her mother to the Lord which is how we get five generations. Esther was an incredibly effective and faithful missionary to the Jews along with her first Julius and after he died with her second husband Wolf Kendal. They were missionaries in Ukraine, in the UK and eventually in Canada where my Grandfather Fred grew up and where my mother was born. My grandfather was one of the early graduates from the Jewish Studies department of Moody Bible Institute in the late 1920's. He eventually made his way to Detroit Michigan where he led a mission to the Jews called "Israel's Remnant." People used to come into the storefront looking for pieces of carpeting from the Holy Land. Recently I asked my

mother about her memories of those early ministry years. She told me “my father’s Bible studies were mostly filled with Miskinim.” (poor souls for those who never heard the phrase Maybe things haven’t changed all that much after all.) Eventually they planted the 1st Hebrew Christian Church of Detroit which along with the 1st Hebrew Christian Church of Chicago may be considered a kind of paleo Messianic congregation in it’s day. They used to sing standard Christian hymns translated into Yiddish. My father was raised in a traditional Jewish home in Mobile, Alabama the southern part of the United States. When he was just 19 years of age he came to faith in Yeshua through the witness of my mother’s family responding to an invitation there at the 1st Hebrew Christian Church of Detroit. I don’t think my mother considered him to be one of those miskinim. So I had the privilege of being raised in a Messianic Jewish home where I was taught my Jewish identity and with it knowing Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. As the psalmist declared, “Indeed I have a beautiful inheritance.” In 1989 my parents made Aliyah and have lived here in Jerusalem ever since. I am pleased to have them here with me tonight. Hi mom and dad. In a sense I have through my own personal story been building on the past following in the footsteps of my great grandparents, my grandparents, my parents and now I am so blessed to be able to say that my two children Isaac and Ilana have been serving the Lord in the field of Jewish evangelism as well; my daughter serving in San Francisco with our children and youth ministry and my son and daughter in law, part of the Jews for Jesus branch in Los Angeles, California. So far Isaac and Shaina have given me just one granddaughter but it’s a little too soon to speak of her with regard to Jewish evangelism. She’s just three years old.

But even in my professional career this theme has been part of my experience as well. I've served under many fine leaders from whom I've learned a great deal about building on the past while looking toward the future. One I'll mention here is Jhan Moskowitz who many of you had the privilege of knowing before he was taken from us-far too soon in my opinion. Jhan was a great Bible teacher-the Best in Jews for Jesus- and I learned a lot through listening to him teach. He had a devoted following of those who would come regularly to our Tuesday night Bible study in Skokie, a suburb of Chicago. His folksy style of communication, peppering his lessons with Yiddish phrases such as *mitten drinnen* and his closing applications launched with a question, "So what? Can I really believe this? What difference does this make in my life?" made him so hugely popular that when the day came and he made the announcement that he was transferring to New York City and I would be taking over in his place, a palpable groan of mourning reverberated through the room. I knew it wasn't right for me to take that personally but I had hardly prepared myself for seeing such disappointment at my promotion. For the next six months after Jhan left I almost felt like I should set up a shrine to him in the back parking lot where people could come and lay flowers and grieve. I'm happy to say that while I didn't exactly adopt Jhan's specific folksy style of teaching or his unique sense of humor and Yiddish aphorisms, nor stylized approach to application, I was really blessed to inherit his love for teaching the word of God. And though the ministry there in Chicago became different from what he had it was built on that foundation he had established and I felt blessed to continue following in his footsteps.

I also had the privilege of taking over from Mitch Glaser on two different occasions in Jews for Jesus, one on our music team the

Liberated Wailing Wall and then in our headquarters as Minister-at-Large, a position that Mitch established for the first time in our organization.

But certainly the most challenging experience in my career was assuming the responsibilities of leadership of Jews for Jesus from our Founder Moishe Rosen. Many of you have known Moishe personally and if you haven't, no doubt you've heard about him and his legendary, larger than life and rather eccentric contribution to our field of Jewish evangelism. If you haven't heard much about Moishe then I commend the biography written by his daughter Ruth published by Thomas Nelson, Called to Controversy. I've never before met anyone like Moishe Rosen and I don't expect to though I do look forward to seeing him again one day. Of course Moishe was not just the Founder of Jews for Jesus but one of the Founders of the LCJE. It was his vision for inter-agency cooperation and the mutual encouragement that we would receive from being together that kept LCJE going and growing in the early days. He always looked forward to these meetings and even in his last days nearly dead from cancer with Herculean effort he made his last visit to an LCJE meeting in Phoenix. He had no role, no speaking slot but he wanted to be there and he set an example for all of us who would be leaders in the field and in LCJE.

When I was elected by my peers to succeed Moishe as the second executive director in the history of Jews for Jesus I anticipated it to be a daunting challenge and I was not disappointed. That is to say it was not exactly a bed of roses to follow in Moishe Rosen's footsteps. Moishe continued to serve in the organization after he stepped down. As our Founder he had an office in his home right there in San Francisco and almost from the beginning I found

myself frequently in wrestling matches with Moishe about the future of the organization. He wanted me to consolidate, to pare down the organization and not to expand much beyond where he had grown us. He tried to persuade me that it was virtually impossible to oversee an international organization and that it would be best for us not to have too much of Jews for Jesus be outside of North America. I on the other hand had a vision for expansion and I shared that vision with our staff and with our supporters. I wanted to see us bring our unique style of ministry throughout Europe but especially here to the land of Israel. But even though we disagreed on a vision for the future I knew how important it was that that future be built upon a very solid foundation the Lord had established through the ministry of Moishe Rosen. As Jim Collins has said, we needed to preserve the core while stimulating growth and change.

In the early years of my leadership our staff worked hard to articulate our mission statement and core values; principles that had been inculcated through Moishe's teaching and the policies that he had established but never specifically articulated in the way they needed to be to have that foundation going forward. There's an old Yiddish saying: Vu ikh zits iz der mizrekh vant. Wherever I sit is the eastern wall [meaning the seat of honor] I assured Moishe that would be true of him in Jews for Jesus going forward and despite the fact that many people urged me and sometimes uncharitably so to distance myself from Moishe and to identify publicly any failings he may have had and there were many, I never believed it was right to do so. And I have and will continue to honor him as a uniquely gifted, yes flawed, but uniquely gifted and faithful servant of our Messiah Jesus.

And I believe this is the posture we need to maintain at every level in our field of endeavor if we want to build on the past and look to the future.

2. A Text to Consider

But let's now look again at the text of Scripture as we consider this topic a bit further.

"Listen to me you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord: look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him. For the Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song."

Isaiah is writing to the paleo messianic Jews, the remnant of believers prior to the coming of Yeshua; the remnant of the nation who were pursuing righteousness, who were seeking the Lord, perhaps witnessing the exile to Babylon. They were looking around at the present state of affairs with a degree of dismay and disillusionment and wondering, is God going to preserve us? Will he come through on His promises?

His message to them is the topic for our consideration this evening. The Lord would indeed help them to build on the past while looking to the future. A wonderful idea in light of the present circumstance because while things may have been uncertain for the remnant in the present the past was sure. It was a rock, stable, secure, a quarry, the place where solid stone was

carved out for building for the future. But of course Isaiah isn't speaking about literal rock and literal quarry but rather the spiritual heritage, the foundation of God's calling of his people in Abraham and Sarah. You must gain strength from a depth of knowledge and reliance upon founding people and founding principles. And for those Jewish believers of Isaiah's day, they had a wonderful example, examples in Abraham and Sarah.

Such is our spiritual heritage as well in LCJE whether Jews or Gentiles. And though we may be fewer in number we have promises from God that like Abram and Sarah we must believe and trust the Lord for going forward. What are some of the characteristics of our spiritual heritage in Abraham and Sarah that can serve as the quarry from which we can gain confidence for our future.

The most dominant characteristic of our spiritual parents Abraham and Sarah is one of faith. They set out not knowing where they were going but had faith in the promise of God to grant blessing. As David Harley encouraged us on Monday we too must all respond to the call of God; must be willing nomads of faith believing that God's blessing remains with those who respond with trust and obedience. And even though they were just one when God called them he also said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Gen. 15:5) At one of our youth camps the children were told this story of Abraham from Genesis 15 during a star gazing session at night. As they gazed up at the night sky one child broke the silence with the question, "do the scientists know how many stars there are in the sky?" To which the counselor replied, "no the scientists don't know that." Another child again broke the silence. "Well then

why don't the scientists just count all the Jews?" Makes sense. With childlike faith we can believe that though we are few in number we and those who come after us will shine like lights in the midst of this world. Do you believe?

Isn't it encouraging that we have a Bible that presents the heroes of our faith, not with hagiography but in genuine biography, containing both flaws and faithfulness. These rocks were not without their cracks and flaws. Abraham in particular struggled with genuine fear. As a result on two different occasions he lied or at least stretched the truth by informing Pharaoh and then Abimelech that Sarah was his sister and not his wife-not the best testimony to these pagan kings. Fear and insecurity can cause people of faith to say and do some pretty crazy things. We too in the LCJE can end up stretching the truth, boasting about what we should not, being self-protective with one another instead of open handed. A network can only succeed to the extent that we can be honest and avoid the boasting that comes from fear and insecurity. We can learn from our rock not only how to walk in faith but what not to do, how best not to behave as we move into the future.

Sarah on the other hand, unable to give birth, lived with that growing sense of insecurity. Despite knowing the promise of God she pushed her husband into conceiving a child with her handmaiden. The story of Hagar and Ishmael comes into the Biblical narrative and let's be honest, it doesn't reflect well on this rock from which we were dug. Sarah doubled down on her insecurities by becoming hostile and antagonistic towards the handmaid and the child that she had caused to be brought into the world. In truth, Hagar and Ishmael were treated shamefully by Abraham and Sarah and the legacy of that mistreatment is

with us to this very day. Some have called this the elephant in the room of the LCJE but it need not remain so. Hagar and Ishmael must be welcomed back into the camp. As Eitan Bar said, when Arabs and Jews are hugging one another instead of throwing stones at each other people will see that love. This is the Gospel and the LCJE can set the table for such a transformation going toward the future.

This quarry, despite it's flaws, nevertheless was the place from which to draw those building blocks for the future. But it wasn't their flaws but their faithfulness that Isaiah emphasizes, "For he was but one when I called him." The promise of God to Abraham and Sarah first as recorded in Genesis 12 and then repeated numerous times through the next 15 chapters focuses on their evident faith to trust in God for the future. The promises of God despite all appearance to the contrary would be fulfilled. What a great calling, what a bright future, what a worthwhile commitment to the obedience of faith.

Think about the examples of faithfulness recorded in those chapters as the heritage of faithfulness for us in the LCJE. Abraham was an example of humility and generosity toward others. Swearing to his own hurt, he gave his nephew Lot first choice of land. He could have pulled rank. He was after all the uncle, he was the leader of the family, but he instead became a mentor and in grace treated Lot as his equal. He appealed to Lot's sense of fair play rather than dictating terms to him. He so wanted to avoid conflict he was willing to take less for himself, to prefer another though he certainly had the right to choose first. Sadly Lot chose greed over gratitude and most of us are a lot more like Lot than Abraham. But the best remedy for the disease of greed is generosity. While Lot chose what he perceived to be

what was best for him Abraham's faith and generous response proved to be a better long term decision and Lot's greed in the end cost him nearly everything. Brothers and sisters, this too is the rock from which we were hewn. Imagine if we all began to behave like our father Abraham in this regard? Eschewing our own rights and with humility to prefer one another in love? How surprising and how refreshing would our LCJE meetings be if we were seen to be stumbling over one another to show such deference and love toward one another, to give one another place and privilege we could want for ourselves. Can we aspire to this humility and generosity in the LCJE? How can we not?

There are so many other lessons we might gain from this narrative for building on the past and looking toward the future but in the interest of time I will mention just two more that I feel are crucial for the future of LCJE. Abraham was committed to raising up the next generation. Literally. Now this many not have been readily apparent to those looking on from the top of Mount Moriah. Indeed just the opposite. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (Heb. 11:17-19) Abraham believed that God would raise up the next generation far more than any of us might ever believe and he risked it all to prove that faith. But he did more than that didn't he? He secured the resources necessary for that next generation to succeed. First of all by making sure that Isaac had a proper wife. He sent his trusted servant Eliezer to find the one who would become mother to Jacob and Esau, the one who would comfort Isaac after the death of his mother. Of course I am

not suggesting we start a Messianic dating service in the LCJE or focus on making Shidduch for all the young singles who may be coming down the road, though maybe that isn't such a bad idea. But seriously, we need to work to provide for the future of the LCJE by securing the resources necessary to preserve our future. Later we will have an offering for LCJE that will enable us to put shoe leather to this commitment. But this will happen more and more as we bring young people into our midst and as we give them the opportunity to lead us forward. I feel very honored to have been given the opportunity to speak to you tonight at this closing evening session but this should be the last time I am given such an honor. Four years from now we need to have many more and many younger leaders given such opportunities. And if the Lord should give me years I will be here cheering them on. What about you? After Abraham secured a wife for his son he began to step away; the lead narrative falls now to Isaac but for a very little bit of a postlude in Chapter 25. Verse 5 of chapter 25 says Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. And so should we. But the surprising thing contained in this postlude is an encouragement to all of us here. Abraham remained incredibly fruitful to the very end of his life. It's amazing that as soon as that obligation was secured he had enormous fruitfulness in his marriage to Keturah (Genesis 25:1). While he had to wait for decades to have one child with Sarah, he had six children with Keturah and that within a period of 38 years. 100 to get one child, 38 to get six. We may have already secured our legacy, but we should all seek to remain as fruitful as we can until the Lord takes us home. Abraham and Sarah were remarkable people. In their faith, their flaws, their generosity, the commitment to covenant responsibility and raising up the next generation and finally this continued fruitfulness through to the end of life. All these are wonderful examples from the past to build upon and to

encourage all of us for the future. And I suppose I could end my message right there and it would be enough but I just can't do it because that isn't the end of my text. Isaiah finishes his thought by telling us: **"For the Lord comforts Zion; he comforts all her waste places and makes her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song."**

This is an eschatological promise and if you know me you know I am not about to leave that alone. The point of all of this is that we can be sure that since God has been faithful to our father and mother, to Abraham and Sarah, He will likewise be faithful to us. This is a great comfort for us in the LCJE. All that we labor for, all we anguish over, all this is not in vain and ultimately will be richly rewarded in the future. Yes, Richard Harvey cleverly remarked that if you don't know about eschatology it isn't the end of the world. But eschatology isn't about knowing things. It's about hope. Hope was a commodity in short supply at the time Isaiah wrote and maybe it is in short supply today. But the promise of God to us through Isaiah is triumphant and restorative and greatly encouraging regardless of what your particular view of the end of the age is. This land we are in, this city we have met in is a place that one day very soon will experience the comfort of God. Sorrow will turn to joy and gladness, barrenness to fertility. The plaintiff call of the muezzin will be silenced and replaced with the voice of song and Thanksgiving: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." (Rev. 7:10) That is a future worth building toward. Amen?

