



Joining Together

by Tim Kelley

This past week, those of us who watch the nightly news and follow what's happening in our country, have shared the pain of a number of families who lost children and other family members at the hand of a deranged young man. This event, as tragic as it was, did serve one good purpose. It brought the nation together in unity – at least for a little while – in a spirit of comfort and compassion for those who are suffering and has caused people to take another look at their spiritual life.

Other catastrophic events, such as Hurricane Katrina and the attack on the World Trade Center have brought similar results – uniting the country in ways that seemed impossible at other times. For months after the Twin Towers fell, churches and synagogues throughout America were filled as Christians and Jews began to rebuild their relationship with God.

But is binging catastrophe YHVH's preferred method of bringing people together – especially His people? Do people really need to suffer in order to turn back to God? And when people do turn to God, how do they relate to their brothers in order to keep their spiritual awakening alive?

In this teaching, I want to discuss a prophetic event that involves the family of God - those of us who consider ourselves to be God's children. This is an event that – if we handle it correctly – can bring joy to most of the world's population, but if we handle it incorrectly, will lead to the greatest catastrophe the world has seen since Noah's flood. That event is called – according to the Jews – “the re-gathering of the exiles”. We could call it “the return of the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel”. In either case, it's the restoration of one of the largest families ever – the family of Israel.

For a quick history lesson . . .

The nation of Israel split after the death of King Solomon and became “two houses”; - two families. As time went on the northern kingdom of Israel – known in prophecy as Ephraim or Israel – was taken captive and exiled from the land. A couple of centuries later, the southern kingdom – known in prophecy as Judah, was taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. After being released roughly seventy years later, they continued as a nation until they were driven out of the land and dispersed in the second century AD.

Prophecies show that both kingdoms will be re-gathered into one nation sometime during the End Days, in fact, the re-gathering of the exiles is one of the most prophesied events in the Bible. The Old Testament is replete with prophecies pertaining to Israel becoming a unified people again. Here are just a few:

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 30:3** then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you.

^{ESV} **Isaiah 11:12** He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

^{NKJ} **Isaiah 43:5** Fear not, for I *am* with you; I will bring your descendants from the east, And gather you from the west;

^{ESV} **Isaiah 56:8** The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, "I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered."

^{NKJ} **Jeremiah 29:14** I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.

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But just as Israel was gradually dismantled, it will come together in stages, and how we react when God begins to gather his people back may affect how God's plan is carried out. We're going to look at an earlier partial fulfillment of the prophecies of return to see how God's people dealt with those who were returning in their day, but before we do, I want us to consider the ramifications if we don't get it right this time.

Nearly 3500 years ago, the prophet Moses was standing before YHVH as He appeared in a burning bush. Moses was being sent to Egypt to gather Israel and take them to the Promised Land, but Moses wasn't so sure he was up to the task. He suspected the Israelite leaders would question his intentions, so He asked YHVH to provide a name that the leaders would understand, and of course – YHVH provided a name. Then God said something that might help us understand a statement he made 1500 years later. He said:

^{NKJ} **Exodus 3:15** . . . "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: 'The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This *is* My name forever, and this *is* My memorial to all generations.'

Notice – the children spoken of here are the children of Israel, or more literally “son's of Israel”, and of course the “fathers” are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When we look at Abraham's life, we see that he made a number of bad choices, but never-the-less, according to James, he was called “the Friend of God”¹. What made Abraham God's friend? When he was approached by three Messengers who were headed to Sodom, the scripture says:

^{NKJ} **Genesis 18:17-19** And the LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing . . .¹⁹ "For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."

Now let's go to the book of Malachi, to an end-time prophecy that (I believe) pertains to us – the children of God, the descendants of Abraham. In this prophecy, the end-time Elijah is supposed to:

^{ESV} **Malachi 4:6** . . . turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers . . ."

Who are the fathers, and who are the sons? I submit that the father's are again - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the son's are us – the children of Israel. What's more, I believe this passage could just as easily be translated:

"He will return the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers."

In other words, the work of Elijah would cause the Children of Israel's hearts to be like that of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; men who “keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice”². Why is that important? Because the latter part of Malachi's prophecy indicates that if we don't have a change of heart, God will

^{ESV} **Malachi 4:6** . . . “come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

So, according to this scripture, God's people need to become re-united with God before destruction comes, not after. If we act now to return to the ways of God as illustrated by “the fathers”, maybe we can avert the destruction that's poised to envelope our land.

“But the prophecies are set” you might say. “The tribulation has been prophesied, and thus must come to pass”. Maybe, or maybe not! Remember the story of Jonah. He was sent by God to pronounce destruction on the people of Nineveh. But Nineveh repented and God relented. Thus Nineveh was spared. Can it happen again? Absolutely! I don't believe this story was put in the Bible just to fill space!

¹ James 2:23

² From Genesis 18:19 quoted earlier

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If we are part of those whose hearts are turning – if we're part of the exiles, then let's talk about how we should deal with and react to others YHVH is calling back to Him.

Observant Jewish people pray a particular prayer two, and sometimes three times a day. The prayer is called the Shemoni Esrei, or 18 benedictions. It's more widely known as the Amidah or Standing Prayers. The tenth of the eighteen benedictions is call "Kibbutz Galuyot" – Regather of the Exiles. It goes like this:

Sound the great shofar for our freedom, raise the ensign to gather our exiles, and gather us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed are you, O Lord, who gathers the dispersed of his people Israel.

The Jewish people are praying for the gathering of the exiles – their brothers – back to God and His ways. Are we? Is the largest family reunion in world history – the reunion of the people God has chosen to honor and praise Him³, important enough for us to pray that it come quickly?

Unfortunately, most of today's Israelites don't recognize the fact that they are Israelites. They believe they are Gentiles – and in regards to the first century understanding of the term – they are! In the first century, the Gentiles were the people who ate pork, observed religious festivals other than those God gave Israel, and considered the Torah to be a strange set of laws⁴. Because Ephraim (the exiled northern tribes of Israel) are acting like Gentiles, they think they are Gentiles. They have a real identity problem!

The Bible teaches about a family that had an identity problem. In fact, the story is in this week's parasha⁵. It's the story of Joseph when he revealed himself to his brothers. In the story, Joseph was the second-in-command of all Egypt. His brothers came to Egypt to buy grain during a famine, but they didn't recognize that the person they were bowing down to and purchasing grain from was none other than their brother – the one they had rejected and cast into a pit. They didn't recognize Joseph because he had taken on a non-Israelite name, and was dressed as an Egyptian. As the story goes, Joseph became their salvation from the famine . . . the first savior of Israel.

There are many lessons for us in the story of Joseph, but two of the most important are that:

1. our brother may not look like what we expect. He may be dressed differently and may even have some different customs.
2. our reaction to our new-found brother must be based on God's plan, not on our feelings towards him

This leads into the main point of what I want to say.

Many of us have been brought up thinking that we are the "church" and that the "church" replaced Israel – or as many were taught – the "Jews", in God's plan. In part, this misunderstanding was brought on by our "identity problem" . . . we don't understand that we are Israelites too - just not Jewish Israelites.

Once we came to understand that we, just like the Jews, were descendants of Jacob and of the seed of Abraham, we became somewhat arrogant, thinking that – even though we were somewhat new to the Torah – we knew it better than the Jewish leaders and sages who had spent the last 2000 years studying it. This, of course, caused problems between us and the Jewish people and has oftentimes caused us to miss the reason God is calling us back at this time.

For the past 14 months, our fellowship has been conducting a very intense study of Paul's letter to the Romans. Just about every-other week we'd devote nearly an hour to this study, and on some weeks, we'd only be able to cover just two or three verses. We used various sources to help in the study, including commentaries such as the Expositor's Bible Commentary. But the most valuable source was the Septuagint – the second century BC Greek translation of the Tnakh – the Old Testament. The Septuagint (LXX) is a very valuable tool in the study of the Gospels and the various epistles for two primary reasons:

³ Psalm 22:3

⁴ Hosea 8:12

⁵ literally "portion" – the traditional reading from the Torah for a given week

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1. it's a translation into Greek that was done prior to the Messiah Yeshua's first advent, thus it provides us a picture into the thinking of the Jewish people regarding many of the Old Testament prophecies, and
2. It's the text from which most of the New Testament writers quote.

In our study of Romans, we've (or at least I've) come to see that after the resurrection of The Messiah, God began a partial fulfillment of the prophecies of return that we talked about earlier. These returning Israelites were having problems fitting into the synagogue in Rome, and Paul was trying to deal with it. It's much the same problem we in the Hebraic movement are facing today, that is the resistance of the Jewish believers to accept and welcome the non-Jewish Israelites (Ephraim – the northern tribes) back into the community of Israel.

Yeshua knew this would happen and thus gave us the Parable of the Prodigal Son to show that even though the Jewish brothers were (at least during His lifetime) attempting to follow YHWH's ways, they must be willing to accept their brother (Ephraim) back.

Part of the problem in Rome was that of Oral Law. The believing Pharisees thought the returning exiles should subscribe to the Jewish Oral Law as well as the Torah, but Paul believed that observance to Oral Law – though it had many good points – was not a prerequisite for being a part of the Hebraic family. There on the other hand, he chided the returning exiles for their apparent “in your face” attitude toward the Jewish traditions.

To help diffuse the problem, he explained what God was in the process of doing . . . He was beginning to call Ephraim back for a special purpose, and for the mean time, Judah – who had been the sole representative of the Torah for nearly 1000 years, would be taking the back seat for a while. But even in that, he warned Ephraim to not boast, for they had not brought the Messiah, the Jews through their diligence had paved the way for the coming of The Messiah⁶.

After explaining to the congregation what God is doing, Paul went on to show that when two different cultures come together, it's better for each group to accommodate the other than to straighten the other group out.

Herein lays the problem within the Hebraic / Messianic movement. God is calling a number of non-Jews into a Torah-based lifestyle that has been ridiculed by Christians for years and dominated for nearly 3000 years by Jews, and what's more – though this is all new to the Christians, they want to tell the Jews that their observance of Torah is all wrong! It's sort of like a new young apprentice coming into a machine shop and telling all the experienced machinists that they're doing it all wrong. You can imagine how that would go over!

So what can we do to help our Jewish believers as well on other non-Jewish believers who are turning to the Messianic walk. How can we all get along in order to build the family of God? I've got five suggestions:

1. Stop putting each other down. We all want to elevate our beliefs, our congregations, and ourselves above others. In regards to the Jewish believers, we must come to realize that, if we believe the prophecies of return or true and that God intends to draw both Israel and Judah back, we are all going to be walking hand in hand some day on our way to the Holy City – Jerusalem.

We will be “Going Up” to Jerusalem just as they did during the Glory Days of Israel, when small bands of people would begin their walk from the Galilee – the area of the northern tribes – and pick up people along the way as they approached Jerusalem. As they got closer to the Temple, more and more “Jews” would be joining in. When they do, we want to welcome them, not shun them.

2. Capitalize on what each person or group has in common. We all believe in the God of Israel - the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We all walk according to the same book – the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Most of us believe we should use His name – though we may disagree on its pronunciation. I submit that many of the various Sabbath keeping religions share

⁶ Romans 11:18

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more things in common than they do differences. We should be able to work together based on our shared views, not our differences.

3. Avoid drawing “Lines in the Sand”. We often draw lines in the sand where YHVH has not drawn them. I remember a preacher once saying from the pulpit that if anyone in the congregation did not believe that Jesus was in the grave exactly 72 hours, that person was not worshipping the true God. Show me in the Bible that God has set that stipulation. It’s just not there!

God has given us some very clear lines in the sand, and they are found in His Torah. God seems to define His people by their purpose and their willingness to follow His law. If that’s God’s criteria, it should be ours as well.

4. Learn more about the culture of those who share similar beliefs. I’ve come across a number of people who automatically discount what I say because I came from the Worldwide Church of God culture, even though they probably agree with 90% of what I believe. Many people have the wrong view of the WWCG based on ignorance. They’ve heard rumors, but have never really checked it out.

The same holds true for Judaism. Many Christians are afraid of it simply because they don’t understand it. Yes, the Jews have a lot of traditions, a lot of prayers, and a lot of books, but so did you! I like to teach about the value of the Amidah prayer, a very popular prayer within Judaism, but to some people their first reaction is “that’s vain repetition”⁷.

^{NKJ} **Matthew 6:7** "And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Have you ever notice who the “heathen” are that Yeshua is referring to? It’s the Gentiles, not the Jews. Check the Greek and you’ll see that the word is “ethnikos (Strong’s 1482), a word that is derived from the Greek word that is almost always translated “Gentiles”.

It would do us good to learn a little about other religious cultures, especially those that share many of the same beliefs.

5. This next suggestion is probably the most important – especially in regards to our relationship with our brother Judah.

In Romans 11, Paul gave a mandate to non-Jewish Israel. He showed the reason why God moved his focus from Judah to Ephraim during this age, and it’s very clear.

^{KJV} **Romans 11:11** I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles.

Our mandate is to provoke Judah to jealousy. That’s why we’ve been called! Now think about it . . . can we provoke them to jealousy by knocking their traditions, criticizing their beliefs, or accusing them of changing the law? No! They won’t get jealous about that – they’ll just ignore us. The only way we can provoke them to jealousy is by practicing “their” Torah better than they do! We’ve got to become “Torah Warriors” in our diligence and commitment to the observance of God’s law and in our love toward one another – even those who are not 100% aligned with us. This is, according to Paul, the reason why God is calling us back!

I mentioned earlier that this week’s Torah portion is about Joseph revealing himself to his brothers. This is a story about the love and compassion Joseph – let’s say “the northern tribes” – has for his brothers – even Judah! It’s customary in a traditional Torah study to also read what’s called the “Haftara” portion. This is a portion that is thematically attached to the Torah portion. This week’s Haftara portion is Ezekial 37:15 – 28. This is the two sticks prophecy – the prophecy about the joining of Israel – the House of Joseph - and the House of Judah back together as one people. It’s an end time prophecy that will surely come to pass.

⁷ Matthew 6:7

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NKJ Ezekiel 37:15-19 ¹⁵ Again the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ¹⁶ "As for you, son of man, take a stick for yourself and write on it: 'For Judah and for the children of Israel, his companions.' Then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and *for* all the house of Israel, his companions.' ¹⁷ "Then join them one to another for yourself into one stick, and they will become one in your hand. ¹⁸ " And when the children of your people speak to you, saying, 'Will you not show us what you *mean* by these?' -- ¹⁹ "say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Surely I will take the stick of Joseph, which *is* in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will join them with it, with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand." '

Are we going to be a part of Elijah's end-time work, the job of turning the hearts of the children to the fathers, or are we going to put stumbling blocks in the way. Let's let our hearts return to the dreams of the fathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and play a role in the restoration of the family of God!

Shalom Alechem