

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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Sons and Daughters of the



T I N E V O C

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By Rev. Cheryl Hauer, *International Vice President*
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I sat in the conference listening intently to a very dear Orthodox Jewish friend address us Christians and share his heart about Jewish–Christian relations. This is a man who loves God passionately and has literally dedicated his life to building sincere and respectful friendships between his faith community and mine. He spoke of his time attending a Christian university and the glimpses he received into the similarities and differences between our two faith systems. He delighted in those areas where we are clearly of one heart, but found it disturbing at times when he recognized the chasm that still exists between us. Interestingly, he came away with the sense that in some ways, it is harder to be a Christian than it is to be a Jew.

As Christians, most of us in that room were surprised by his statement and would have disagreed with him. Surely he realized that most Western Christians today have no real personal experience of persecution, nothing at least that would compare to the generations of Jews who have suffered discrimination, oppression, intimidation, even torture and death and who today still deal with anti-Semitism. And most Christians would say that



a hallmark of Christianity is liberty. We aren't required to pray at certain specific times; we don't have a lot of "rules" to follow; we have no prescribed collective Bible reading schedule; we have comparatively few holidays and our celebrations are pretty free form. Many would respond by telling my friend that Jesus (Yeshua) came to bring us freedom from...well, partly from Judaism and all its laws.

As I thought about it, however, I realized that I have other Jewish friends who might agree with him. They are Orthodox Jews who are thought by many Christians to be under the “heavy burden of the law,” but their lives show something very different—joy, contentment, practicality and a certain comfortable confidence in who they are.

BORN INTO IDENTITY

Perhaps the issue we are dealing with here is identity. Uniquely, Jews are born into a faith, a claim we Christians do not make. It is said that this faith chooses the Jew before the Jew chooses it. Every Jewish child is born with an unbreakable connection to the story of the Jewish people, of their parents, their grandparents and their parents before them through nearly 40 centuries from the day that Abraham and Sarah began their journey to a land that they did not know. Abraham heard the voice of God and received from Him the promise of a future, a destiny that would eventually be fulfilled in the land we know today as Israel. It is an incredible story, a love story that belongs to every Bible believer.

Through the millennia, Abraham’s descendants would continue his journey—from the few that left Ur of the Chaldeans to the million plus that left Egypt—and eventually the tribes that settled the land. They were

chosen by God to create a nation, to build a society unlike anything the earth had seen before. It would be a civilization built on

justice and compassion, honoring the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and recognizing

every human as a bearer of His image; a culture predicated on a relationship between God and man as His ambassadors charged with transforming the world; a relationship that began with the institution of an everlasting covenant.



Born into Identity

BORN INTO COVENANT

We find that covenant in Genesis 15:7–18. It is in these verses that God reveals the beginnings of His plan for His people. He has already promised that He will bless them, that they will be a blessing to all of mankind and that He will, in turn, bless all men who bless them. But here His relationship with Abraham becomes more intimate. God is so pleased with Abraham's reactions of faith and trust that He acknowledges them as righteousness. He promises Abraham that his offspring will be like the stars of the sky and that the land of Canaan will be the possession of him and all his descendants after him. He will be their God and they will be His people. And those promises are sealed with a covenant.

In Jeremiah 34:18, the prophet speaks of the Israelites as those who cut the calf in two and walked between the pieces. Jeremiah is referring to the ritual called “cutting a covenant” that we find in our verses in Genesis 15. Abraham gathered the heifer, the goat and the ram as God instructed, cut them in two and placed them in parallel rows. Ordinarily, when this process was used to seal a covenant, those who were participants would pass together between the pieces while reciting the terms of the covenant. At the end, they would declare their commitment to the covenant, stating that if they should fail to uphold their part of the relationship, they would expect to receive the same treatment as the sacrificed animals.

According to Genesis 15:17–18, however, God did something a little different this time. Technically, Abraham, as the representative of the Jewish people, did not pass between the pieces. God, in the form of two ancient symbols of deity, passed between the pieces alone. The covenant is mentioned several times in the ensuing verses



of Genesis and includes all of Abraham's descendants after him. So the message was very clear: this covenant would be everlasting and unconditional. Every Jewish baby from that day on would be born as a child of the covenant, and circumcision on the eighth day would be evidence of that relationship.

The Writings of the Apostles (NT) tell us that as Christians we are also sons and daughters of Abraham through faith:

“Just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham” (Gal. 3:6–9).

“Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all” (Rom. 4:16).

“And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).

EMUNAH

We cannot underplay the importance of faith in this equation. The Hebrew word for faith is *emunah*. It is derived from the verb *aman*, which means to trust, as is the word *emet*, which means truth. For mankind, faith is seldom certainty. According to the rabbis, it is the courage to live with uncertainty. It is not know-

ing all the answers, but living with the questions. It is the knowledge that we are indeed vulnerable, a state in which we can rejoice because in that vulnerability, we reach out to God and in His faithfulness,

He answers. Such was Abraham's state when he believed God. When the Lord spoke, Abraham never doubted the veracity of His words.



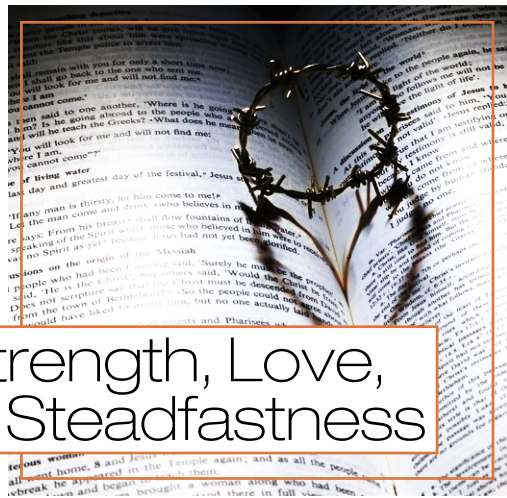
Living in
Uncertainty

But his belief went beyond mental assent to obedient action. Abraham was faithful. He responded to God with trustworthiness and honesty. It was his faithfulness that allowed him to take his wife, his family and his possessions and set out blindly on a journey without knowing the destination. He and Sarah left family, friends and heritage behind and courageously walked into an unknown future because they were faithful. And they recognized God's faithfulness far surpassed even their own.

In Hosea 2:19–20, we are given a glimpse of what God's covenant faithfulness looks like. Here we find God speaking of betrothing Himself to Israel, which is clearly a reference to covenant. He says He will betroth Himself in righteousness, loving-kindness, mercies and faithfulness. These words are all synonyms and are all covenantal terms. According to *Vines' Expository Dictionary*, the assurance of God's covenants and promises is established by God's nature. He is faithful.

CHESED

One of the most important terms in the vocabulary of biblical theology is *chesed*, a word often used when speaking of God's love for His people. It is translated as loving-kindness, steadfast, merciful and goodness. It is found 240 times in the *Tanakh* (OT), and it is another covenantal term. *Vine's Expository Dictionary* tells us that there are three basic meanings of the word which always interact: strength, steadfastness and love. Any understanding of the word that fails to suggest all three loses important aspects of its meaning. Love by itself can easily become sentimental, while strength or steadfastness can seem obligatory. But *chesed* is not just a matter of obligation; it is also God's generosity. It is not only a matter of loyalty but also of mercy. It is the extravagant, incomprehensible, steadfast love of God. It is the love that will remain even if the mountains depart and the hills are removed. It

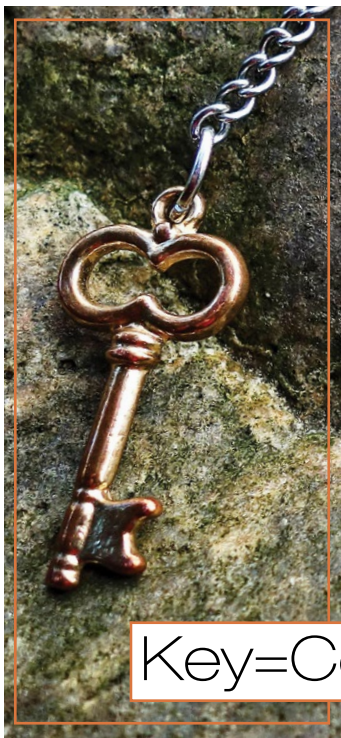


Strength, Love,
& Steadfastness

is the love that God promises to a thousand generations, that He says is everlasting.

When God passed before Moses in Exodus 34, He identified Himself as the LORD, the LORD God, who is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and *abounding in chesed* and truth, *keeping chesed* for thousands. But *chesed* and *emunah* are not just things that God does, ways in which He behaves or favors that He bestows. They are who God is, His nature, like *emunah*, the very essence of His character. And they are the rock on which the covenant is built.

THE PROMISE OF COVENANT



Key=Covenant

This is the key to that sense of identity. Being sons and daughters of the covenant isn't something that the Jewish people or Christians do. It is who we are. And because that covenant is built on the solid rock of God's *emunah* and *chesed*, there is never a question as to its validity or importance. We can trust in a God whose very nature is faithfulness. We can be confident in a God who is bound by covenant to love His children with an extravagant, everlasting love. We can walk in obedience and have faith when we are steeped in uncertainty, because that is who we are.

Romans 11:17 tells us that as believers we are grafted into the olive tree that is Israel. Paul tells the Ephesians—Gentiles who had once been strangers to the covenant of promise—that they were now a part of it through their relationship with the Jewish Messiah. So are believers today.

Unfortunately, in some Christian circles, there is little teaching regarding the importance of covenant in our relationship with the Lord. As we recognize the truth of the covenant that we have entered into with Him—rock solid and based on His love and faithfulness—we see ourselves as sons and daughters of Abraham, links in a chain that began with Abraham and Sarah millennia ago and will continue until the Messiah returns. Resting

in God's *chesed*, that extravagant, forgiving, all-encompassing love He has for us, we understand Paul's prayer for followers of Jesus (Yeshua) in Ephesians 3:17–19:

“That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17–19).

As we, like Abraham, take God at His word, believe and are faithful, trusting in *His* faithfulness, not doubting, but assured of who He is and who He says we are...we truly find our identity in Him.

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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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