

## **“They are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Romans 9:6)**

**Brent L. Top**

### **I. BYU Jerusalem Center for Near-Eastern Studies (“Mormon University”)**

My passion for Israel began with my first visit in 1981. There had been a BYU Study Abroad program in Israel for many years, but in 1979 Elder Howard W. Hunter announced the Church would build a Center on Mount Scopus. Ground was broken for the BYU Jerusalem Center in 1984 which opened the floodgates to opposition and controversy. In 1989 Elder Hunter dedicated the Center. When I joined the BYU faculty in 1987 (the same year that the Israeli Knesset approved the agreement). I sought and prepared for an opportunity to be on the faculty at the Jerusalem Center. It was one of my most important professional ambitions, but I certainly didn't know then how that experience would change my life (and the lives of my family.)

We had the privilege of living in Jerusalem 1993-94—part of the time in an apartment in Jerusalem and the rest of the time in the Center. I taught Old Testament and New Testament and led my students each semester on field trips all over the land. No tourist can experience Israel the way we did by living in Israel and being fully immersed in the land, its history, its peoples, the cultures, and the very complex political situation. Our children still speak fondly of the very unique experiences they had and the great friends they made that came from many different countries and diverse religious and cultural backgrounds.

I became associate dean of Religious Education in 1997 and one of my responsibilities was to recruit and train future religion faculty for the Jerusalem Center. I visited the Center every year and took several groups of faculty to the Holy Land to help prepare them for the experience they would have when they lived and taught there. To say that, Israel “got into my system” is an understatement. We love the Holy Land and love helping others experience the same feelings we have for that place. We travel and lead tours to Israel every year—some years I go multiple times. (If it wasn't for the long plane ride, jet lag—and that I have to work for a living—Wendy and I would go even more often. We would love to live there again someday.)

Many of you have perhaps been to the Center or even studied there or had family members there. So this may not be new to you, but for those who have not been there or know much about our program, let me share a few observations about the program.

#### **JERUSALEM CENTER ACADEMIC PROGRAM:**

During the semester (4 months) the students study:

- Old Testament and New Testament
- Ancient Near-Eastern Studies—history and geography of the Holy Land
- Islamic Civilization (taught by a local Palestinian scholar)
- Jewish Civilization (taught by a local Jewish rabbi and/or scholar)
- Beginning Hebrew OR Arabic

There are special lectures each week—folk-dancing, cultural experiences—visits to synagogues, dinners with local families—they experience real Jewish and Muslim holy day dinners. Visits to Jewish settlements and Palestinian refugee camps. It is a demanding academic program, but we want the students to not spend all their time in the library, but really experience the culture of the place—including shopping!!!!

POLITICAL NEUTRALITY—balance. Students see Palestinians and Jews working together at the Center.

Pres. Howard W. Hunter taught:

*“Our father does not favor one people over another, but accepts all those of every nation who fear him and work righteousness. . . .*

*As members of the Lord’s church, we need to lift our vision beyond our personal prejudices. We need to discover the supreme truth that indeed our father is no respecter of persons. Sometimes we unduly offend brothers and sisters of other nations by assigning exclusiveness to one nationality of people over another. . . .*

*Both the Jews and the Arabs are children of our father . . . .*

*To our friends of Judah, we say: we are your brethren in the house of Joseph—we feel a close relationship to you. . . .*

*To our kinsmen of Abraham (Arabs), we say: we are your brethren—we look upon no nation or nationality as second-class citizens. . . .*

*As our father loves all his children, we must love all people—of every race, culture and nationality—and teach them the principles of the gospel. . . .”*

**NON-PROSELYTING AGREEMENT—It is OUR agreement, not an Israel-imposed Law**

Example 1—Wendy taking Israeli visitors on a tour of the Center—when they asked questions about the Church and our beliefs, Wendy (and all the hosts at the Center) had to say, “You can go to the library at Hebrew U and read in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism. We cannot answer your questions or talk about our beliefs.” Often they would say, “This is a free country. You can talk about whatever you want.” They didn’t understand our agreement.

Example 2—At a district conference in Jerusalem, Pres. Faust responding to a question about why we can’t proselyte when that is one of our fundamental missions said that more good would come from keeping our agreement. He explained that sometimes we can teach more by actions than with words.

‘WE KNOW YOU WON’T PROSELYTE, BUT WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT THE LIGHT IN THEIR EYES.’ (Pres. Faust shared this experience in Gen Conf Oct. 2005)

--students at Bet Sh’ean and airport

--“Mormon discount”—students are known and often “protected” from harm

The “lights in the eyes” and the lives of our students (and all faithful LDS) will go along way to helping break down barriers, bring peace to the troubled land, and fulfill the promises of God.

--Pres. Hunter’s experience with an Egyptian cabinet minister—“If a bridge is ever to be built between Christianity and Islam, it must be built by the Mormon Church.”

--Pres. Faust at a dinner for the major players in the development of the Center—Mormons, orthodox and secular Jews, Muslims, Christians of many persuasions. He spoke of how the Center had brought all these together—gave apostolic blessing and in essence said that it was the gospel and Church that would help bring peace to that land.

“PRAY FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM”

## II. “HOLY ENVY”

Living in Israel and seeing the deep devotion of Jews, Muslims, and Christians has instilled in me a sense of “holy envy.”

The phrase comes from Kirster Stendahl—noted champion for religious understanding among all people and former professor and Dean of the Harvard Divinity School. While serving as Lutheran bishop of Stockholm Sweden, he came to the defense of the LDS Church when there was opposition to the building of the Stockholm Temple. To the critics, he proposed “THREE RULES OF RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING.”

1. When you’re trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion, not its enemies.
2. Don’t compare your best to their worst.
3. Leave room for “Holy Envy” (Willing to acknowledge elements in other religious traditions that you admire and wish in some way could be part of your own faith or religious practice.)

Numerous examples:

- celebration of Sabbath at the Western Wall by dancing and singing of Yeshiva students
- Rabbi Rosen Sabbath --prayers
- Simcha Torah --Talit, teffilin, mezuzah
- devotion to study
- Holy Days—symbolism

Do others have “holy envy” of LDS practices and traditions? Does my living of my religion radiate a sense of joy and devotion that others would envy?

Example—Justin’s Jewish military friend’s envy of LDS temple worship—“This is what is missing from my Judaism.”

## III. CHOSENNESS: LINEAGE OR COVENANT

Living in the Holy Land not only created a Holy Envy for certain practices, but also a deeper understanding and appreciation for scriptural concepts—things that I had read many times, but became alive to me in the Holy Land.

Latter-day Saint scripture—particularly the Book of Mormon—has rich doctrine regarding Israel. Terms such as Jew, Gentile, gathering, Zion, chosen, etc. mean a great deal to us. But do we understand what these terms mean?

Example—Rabbi Harold Kushner speaking at BYU—“Only in Utah am I considered a gentile.”

We often speak of our youth being a “chosen generation”—but do we know that that term was also used to speak of the ancient Israelites—the forefathers of the Jews—and the Mormons! What made them “chosen”? What does it mean to be a “chosen people”—a term often used in talking about the Jews?

Example of Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof* talking to God about the Jews being “chosen.” He reminds God of the many difficulties the Jews have experienced. (Tevya humorously includes his own poverty in that litany of things.) And then Tevya says, “I know, I know we are your chosen people. But once in awhile, can’t you choose someone else? Tevya’s words speak of the **burden of chosenness**. It is more profound than we sometimes think.

I had rings made for myself, my wife, and each of the children that would remind us of what it really means to be “chosen.”

We think of peculiar as “weird” or “unique,” but it means something more profoundly positive. The Hebrew word that is on our rings is *SEGULLAH*—*peculiar treasure*.

#### **EXODUS 19:3-6—A PECULIAR PEOPLE**

What makes us “Segullah”? Covenant keeping not just lineage. The whole history of Ancient Israel as found in the OT is God trying to get His people—His chosen people—those of the lineage of Israel to return to the covenant. They remembered their lineage, but they often forgot their covenant. They often forgot why God chose them in the first place.

#### **DEUTERONOMY 7:6-9,11-14—WHY GOD CHOSE ISRAEL**

Like being the birthright child, there is a burden or responsibility to being chosen—covenants and commitments, devotion to God and the entire family.

It was this very concept that Paul so often reminded the New Testament Saints—both Jews and Gentiles. He declared: “THEY ARE NOT ALL ISRAEL, WHICH ARE OF ISRAEL.” What in the world does he mean by that? A great battle within the Church surrounded the whole issue of lineage and the expectation to live by Jewish practices. Could you be saved if you weren’t fully Jewish?

**Romans 9:8—It is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise.**

Lineage doesn’t ensure salvation. Rather acceptance of the covenant—obedience to the principles and ordinances of the gospel are the more important qualifications for being “of Israel.”

So what does that mean to us today? Are we Jews? Are we Gentiles? What does it mean to be a “heir of the promises”?

Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught:

What does an heir of the celestial kingdom. An heir is one who has a rightful claim to an inheritance. But his inheritance is not automatic. An heir must perfect his claim by complying with certain formalities. In the secular law, these formalities include requirements as filing a proof of heirship within the required time and showing all the debts of the estate are paid. In the gospel law, the formalities include adherence to covenants and ordinances of the Gospel.

So we could have the right lineage, but not qualify as an heir. Like ancient Israelites who turned their back on the covenant and lost their peculiar status and chosenness, Latter-day Saints can do the same thing. If we are cultural Mormons only or pride ourselves on our lineage—Ephraim or otherwise—and fail to live up to the “burden of chosenness” we are “not of Israel.”

To the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord reiterated that righteousness and obedience not merely foreordination or lineage are required to be of “covenant Israel.”

**D&C 64:36—For verily I say that the rebellious are not of the blood of Ephraim.**

#### **CLOSING**

I love Israel—its peoples and culture. I feel a special kinship to my Jewish cousins. I have holy envy. But what I learned most of all about Israel is the importance of covenant. I desire to have all the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.