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Israel Teaching Letter

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“CONSIDER ABRAHAM . . .”

Consider Abraham: *“He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”* (Galatians 3:6).

Avraham Avinu (Our Father, Abraham) is terminology found frequently in Jewish and Rabbinic literature.¹ It does not appear as such in the Tanach (Old Testament). But, the New Testament attests to it multiple times, e.g., in the Gospels, Acts, and Epistles.² This should not surprise us since the theological reflections, traditions and terminology of the sages and rabbis formed the Jewish views of Yeshua (Jesus) and His first disciples.³

Abraham was considered the first proselyte to Judaism, and subsequently became the patriarch of the Jewish nation. He is esteemed for many virtues, like wisdom, courage, passion, hospitality, generosity, and the determination to teach *“...his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just”* (Gen. 18:19). But above all else, Abraham is venerated for his faith. He is the very embodiment of Habakkuk’s famous declaration that, *“The righteous shall live by his faith”* (Hab. 2:4).

For precisely this reason, Abraham is central to the theological reflection of the *Brit Chadasha* (New Testament). For those of us who formerly were “Gentiles” (pagans), to be in Messiah by faith is not only to be engrafted into the covenant family of God, Israel, but to become part of the very seed of Abraham. We share in the covenants, promises and blessings conferred upon Abraham’s offspring. Moses becomes our teacher (*Moshe Rabbeinu*), but Abraham is called our father (*Avraham Avinu*).

Clearly, then, we do well to reflect upon our family heritage and to ponder the patriarch of our faith. He has much to teach us—indeed, as believers in Yeshua we are called to *“walk in*



- **INTERNATIONAL HEADQUARTERS:** P.O. Box 1093, Jerusalem, Israel, Tel: 972-2-624-5004, E-Mail: intl.office@bridgesforpeace.com
- **AUSTRALIA:** P.O. Box 1006, Tewantin, Queensland 4565, Tel: 07-5474-3626, E-Mail: bfaust@optusnet.com.au
- **CANADA:** P.O. Box 21001, RPO Charleswood, Winnipeg MB R3R 3R2, Tel: 204-489-3697, E-Mail: bfp@mts.net
- **JAPAN:** Taihei Sakura Bldg. 5F, 4-13-2 Taihei, Sumida-Ku, Tokyo 130 0012, Tel: 03-5637-5333, E-Mail: bfp@bfpj.net
- **NEW ZEALAND:** P.O. Box 10142, Te Mai, Whangarei, Tel: 09-438-8376, E-Mail: bfpnz@paradise.net.nz
- **SOUTH AFRICA:** P.O. Box 15263, Panorama 7506, Tel/FAX: 021-975-1941, E-Mail: bfp@mweb.co.za
- **UNITED KINGDOM:** Victoria House, Victoria Road, Buckhurst Hill, Essex IG9 5EX, Tel: 020-8559-2479, E-Mail: info@bridgesforpeace.co.uk
- **UNITED STATES:** P.O. Box 33145, Tulsa, OK 74153-1145, Tel: 800-566-1998, E-Mail: postmaster@bfpusa.org
- **Spanish Resource Center:** PMB 133, 100 Gran Bulevar, Suite 112, San Juan, PR 00926-5955, EUA, Tel/FAX: 787-782-0868, E-Mail: bfp@isla.net

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the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had” (Rom. 4:12).

What was his faith and how does it relate to the Almighty’s covenant with him? Let us reconsider Abraham and his faith from a Hebraic point of view.

THE FOUNDATION OF FAITH

Emunah is the Hebrew word for faith. In some important ways, it differs from its Greek correspondent *pistis* and the English concept of “belief.” Clarifying this can cast fresh light on the New Testament discussions of faith (such as the oft divisive dispute about “faith versus works”). It will help us to see Abraham, “the father of all who believe” (Rom. 4:11 NIV) in a new light, and edify our life in Messiah.

The first occurrence of *emunah* in the Bible is found in the Torah, the 17th chapter of Exodus. Its use there sets a significant standard for all subsequent appearances of the term in Scripture, and illustrates an essential truth about faith from the Hebraic perspective. The setting in Exodus 17 is the unwarranted and malicious attack of Amalek against the just-redeemed children of Israel, on their way to rendezvous with their God at Sinai.

*Faith
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“So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses’ hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword” (Ex. 17:10-13 NIV).

The key phrase is found in verse 12: “And his hands remained steady . . .” (*vay’hi yadaiv emunah* - וידי ידיו אמונה). The word “steady” is actually the Hebrew word for faith, *emunah*. This important truth can easily escape readers in other languages. Consequently, they miss the understanding that *emunah* (faith) fundamentally implies firmness, steadiness, steadfastness, persistence, fidelity or loyalty. In a word, the foundational Hebrew concept of faith is really “faithfulness.” Moses’ hands remained “firm” until the going down of the sun, and through his “faithfulness” Israel triumphed over her foes. Faithfulness is the victory that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4).

To the Hebrew mind, faith is more than belief in something; it is faithfulness to someone. Yes, *emunah* is related to the word for truth and it does imply trust or belief. But it is more than mental assent to truthful propositions or the confidence that comes from intellectual conviction. Faith is fully Hebraic only when it is fully faithful. Perhaps we could render it this way: it is “faith/fulness.” Biblical faith is both trust and trustworthiness; both conviction and persistent determination. But it stands or falls on the foundation of faithfulness. “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all” (Isaiah 7:9). To fail to see this is to fall short of the faith of our father, Abraham.

BELIEF, FAITH & ABRAHAM

Consider Abraham. He believed God (*v’he-emin ba-Adonai* - ויהאמן ביהוה) and God reckoned or counted him righteous (*tzedakah* - צדקה) (Genesis 15:6). “Believed” or *he’emin* is related to that wonderful Hebrew word, “Amen.” The point might be emphasized this way: “Abraham ‘Amen!-ed’ God.” Even demons believe that God is one, however (James 2:19 NASB). So, what was distinctive and commendable about our father Abraham’s faith?

Abraham believed in and trusted God, and God considered him righteous—because he lived by his faith/fulness. In other words, his faith was “perfected” or “completed” in his faithfulness (Jas. 2:22 NASB). Abraham was firm in his commitment, so God could “count on” him. He trusted God, and was trustworthy to Him. He staggered not, but was steadfast in his resolve and determined in his obedience to walk before the Lord.⁴

For many Christians, the questions, “Do you have faith in God?” and “Do you believe in God?” are equivalent. Given the Greco-Roman orientation of our Western mindset, quite naturally we tend to reduce faith to belief, i.e., trust, conviction or assurance about what is true. The Greek verb to believe, *pisteuo*, denotes the act of believing in or having confidence in something or someone. Right belief, in fact, is an essential component of the New Testament teaching about faith. But as noted already, biblical faith is more than “believing rightly” in something; it is being steadfastly faithful to Someone—namely, the One who is faithful and true. The inspired apostolic writings that we call the New Testament emerged from within Judaism, and were built upon the Hebraic matrix of the Tanach (Old Testament) and Jewish theology. And central to that tradition is the *emunah* concept of faith.



As the walls of Jerusalem surround and fortify it, so God's faithfulness is a strong defense and support for His people.

EL EMUNAH

Faithfulness, or *emunah*, is one of the most treasured and trusted character traits of God Himself.

*“O LORD God of hosts, who is like Thee, O mighty LORD?
Thy faithfulness (emunah) surrounds Thee” (Ps. 89:8 NASB).*

On the last day of his life, Moses declares in prophetic utterance:

*“For I proclaim the name of the LORD [YHWH];
Ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock!
His work is perfect, For all His ways are just;
A God of faithfulness (El emunah) and without injustice,
Righteous and upright is He” (Dt. 32:3-4 NASB).*

Even in the midst of God's terrible judgment upon His rebellious children and even Jerusalem itself, the grieving prophet Jeremiah can find comfort in God's covenant loyalty and faithfulness.

*"This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope.
The LORD'S lovingkindnesses (chesed) indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;
Great is Thy faithfulness (emunah)"*
(Lam. 3:21-23 NASB).

That God's *chesed* and His *emunah* often are joined together in Scripture is not surprising. *Chesed* is the Hebrew concept that speaks of God's grace in seeking us out and initiating covenant with us, and then His loyalty and fidelity to the covenant so joined. Though Israel be fickle, He remains faithful because He is a God who abounds in *chesed v'emunah*. That is why it is good to give thanks to the Lord at all times, but especially on the blessed Sabbath day.

*"It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
And to sing praises to Thy name, O Most High;
To declare Thy lovingkindness (chesed) in the morning,
And Thy faithfulness (emunah) by night . . ."*
(Ps. 92:1-2 NASB, "A Song for the Sabbath Day")

FAITH IN/OF YESHUA

These central attributes of the God of Israel, of *chesed* and *emunah*, are demonstrated supremely in the person of His Son, Yeshua, and His work of the cross. Because of the Father's amazing grace and the Son's fervent faithfulness, we are reconciled to the Father and joined to the family of God as adopted sons and daughters.

Nowhere is this grand revelation spoken of more decisively or eloquently than in Paul's epistle to the community of Jewish and non-Jewish believers in Rome. With our Hebraic understanding of faith/fulness, one of Luther's, and thereafter, Protestants' favorite faith texts from Romans can be illuminated even more.

"But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Yeshua the Messiah for all those who believe . . ." (Rom. 3:21-22 NASB).

The "faith" spoken of here, whose is it? The New Testament Greek is open to alternative readings: either "faith in Jesus Christ" or the "faith of Jesus Christ."⁵ To the Hebrew mind, such ambiguity is an asset, not a frustration. For the rabbinically trained apostle, Paul, both truths are essential to affirm. The latter part of the verse emphasizes that this "righteousness" or redemptive action of God to set matters right, is appropriated by "those who believe." On the other hand, the basis of their faith being efficacious is the "faith" of Yeshua - His faithfulness unto death on a cross, as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. It is His faithfulness that saves us, and we appropriate it by faith.

This bears repeating. It is Yeshua's act of obedience unto death that saves us, not a mere act of mental assent on our part. We are not saved by our works, but we are saved by His—when we apprehend it by faith and apply it by faithfulness. His faith/fulness is reckoned or accounted to us by God as righteousness. Like His Father in heaven, Yeshua abounds in grace (*chesed*) towards us; and like our father, Abraham, He walked by His faithfulness (*emunah*). He truly is the seed of Abraham, and therefore those in Messiah share in the covenants, promises and blessings (Eph. 2:13) granted to the great patriarch of our faith.

FAITH AS A WALK

What then should be our response? How shall we live? The biblical pattern is clear and consistent in both testaments: God's gracious initiative must always be enjoined by faith/ful-

ness on the part of His people. We are saved by His gift of grace, but in response our walk of faith/fulness is called forth. We must be doing the good deeds for which we have been created and covenanted in Messiah Jesus - works preordained by God, *“that we should walk in them”* (Eph. 2:10).

Faith/fulness (*emunah*) is a walk, a journey characterized by steadiness, persistence, firmness, fidelity and loyalty. We have a role model for this kind of righteous living, the “man of faith” and the “father of the faithful,” Abraham. We too shall be blessed if we “walk in the footsteps” of his faith/fulness (Rom. 4:12 NIV).

*the
righteous,
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live!*

Habakkuk 2:4 is the pivotal axis upon which all New Testament theology turns. Not surprisingly, this text is viewed in Jewish tradition as one of the summarizing principles of the whole Torah. In other words, all 613 *mitzvot* (laws or deeds) can be summarized in a quintessential way by this one, consisting of only three words in Hebrew: *V'tzaddik be'emunato yih'yeh* - וְצַדִּיק בְּאֱמוּנָתוֹ יִהְיֶה. Literally, “the righteous, by his faithfulness—he shall live!”

This is the essence of biblical faith, and without this kind of faith, *“it is impossible to please God”* (Heb. 11:6). The Hebrews 11 “Hall of Fame” honors those righteous ones whose faithful lives, and even some in their deaths, exemplified Habakkuk 2:4. Among them is *Avraham Avinu*. When reading this Scripture, substitute the word faithfulness for the word faith for a fuller appreciation of our father.

“By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land,

dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:8-10 NASB).

“LECH L’CHA!” “LECH ACHARAI!”

The word from the Lord that came to Abraham to begin his journey was, *“Lech L’cha!”* (לֶךְ לְךָ) (Gen. 12:1) “Go-you-forth!”⁶ *Lech* comes from the root, *halach* (הָלַךְ), meaning “to go,” “to come,” or “to walk.” It is the root of the important rabbinic term *halacha*—how the Jewish people walk, or go forth, with God in obedience to His commands as interpreted by their tradition. *Halacha* is often translated as “the Law,” which needs to be understood as given by God as a gift to help us walk in righteousness and life, not to be bondage.

More significantly, the command given to Abraham is related in Hebrew to the invitation extended by Yeshua to those with hearts to be discipled by Him: *“Lech Acharai!”* “Follow Me,” is the usual translation, but literally it can be rendered, “Walk after Me!” or “Go forth with Me.”

Abraham was sent forth of God on a mission; he responded in faith/fulness, and God made him the father of the people elected to represent Him in the earth. In striking parallel, when *“the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son,”* Yeshua, on a mission ordained from the foundations of the earth (Gal. 4:4 NASB). He, too, walked by faith/fulness and accomplished that for which He was sent.

As a result of His righteous acts, we who believe receive adoption into God’s family as sons and daughters. Through God’s Son, Abraham becomes our father. Into our hearts, *“God has now sent forth the Spirit of His Son . . . crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”* (Gal. 4:4-6 NASB). He then summons us to “Walk after Me!”— to follow the Son, to be discipled to Yeshua, in ever greater

faith/fulness. In this way, we follow in the steps of our father, Abraham. Let us consider well, therefore, the patriarch of our faith and imitate fully his faithfulness—to the glory of his God, who has become our God, the One, true and only God, our Father in heaven.

- by **Dwight A. Pryor**

Dwight is a member of the Advisory Board of Bridges for Peace for many years, and Founder and President of the Center for Judaic-Christian Studies in Dayton, Ohio. For nearly 20 years Dwight has taught the Body of Messiah around the world the Jewish background to the life, teachings and Scriptures of Yeshua (Jesus). Check out the Center's website for more articles by Dwight -- www.jcstudies.com -- or call 1-800-308-6506 for a free catalog of educational resources.

*God
summons us:
Walk
after
Me!*

Footnotes:

1. e.g., from the Midrash, Genesis Rabbah, xcvi, 3: “When Jacob, our father, was about to die, he called his twelve sons and said to them, “Hearken unto the God of Israel, your heavenly Father; perhaps there may be in your hearts a controversy about God.” Then they said, “Even as your heart is whole and undivided towards God, so too is our heart: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” The Jacob pronounced the divine name with his lips, and said, “Blessed be the name of the glory of His Kingdom for ever and ever.” R. Berechiah and R. Helbro in the name of R. Samuel said: Since, then, the Israelites are wont morning and evening, every day, to say: “Hear, O Israel, the word which our father Abraham, from the cave at Machpelah, ordered us to say then, we say regularly still: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”
2. e.g., Matthew 3:9; John 8:39, 53; Acts 7:2; Romans 4:12; James 2:21
3. The so-called “400 silent years” between Malachi and Matthew were anything but. It was a time of serious engagement with the Scriptures, of fertile theological fermentation, and of the development of important Jewish traditions, like synagogue worship - all of which constitute an essential part of the NT milieu out of which sprang the Jesus movement.
4. The rabbis in their midrashic commentary draw attention to the fact that Noah was righteous “in his time” and walked “with” God (Genesis 6:9); whereas Abraham was reckoned righteous without qualification, and he walked “before” God. “Walk before me, and be blameless” (Genesis 17:1 NASB).
5. The form of *pistis* (faith) in Rom. 3:22 can be read either as an objective or a subjective genitive - i.e., that Yeshua is the object of faith, or that He is the subject engaged in faithfulness.
6. E. Fox’s translation, *The Five Books of Moses*

Many pastors, Bible teachers and even lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding, YES! That is why I am sending out this *Israel Teaching Letter*. It is my hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:3).