

**2016 MJTI Commencement Address**  
**Making the Best of The Worst of Times**  
**Rabbi Dr. Mark S. Kinzer (May 17, 2016)**

I am pleased that the MJTI commencement occurs immediately after the annual meeting of the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, and immediately before the annual Hashivenu Forum, for I want to speak this evening about the significance of MJTI, along with Hashivenu and the MJRC, in relation to the period of history in which we find ourselves.

“IT WAS the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.” (Charles Dickens, *Tale of Two Cities*)

Charles Dickens wrote these words about the 1770’s. They apply just as well to the 1970’s.

Many of us think of the 1970’s as the golden age of Messianic Jewish history. With the Jesus movement in full swing, thousands of young Jews were coming to faith in Yeshua. In the wake of the Six Day War, other Jews who already believed in Yeshua were rediscovering their Jewish identity. Many of the graying Hebrew-Christian organizations of the 1940’s and 50’s were rebranded and reborn as Messianic Jewish institutions, and a multitude of new institutions were established—among them, the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations. All who encountered Yeshua in that time sensed the nearness of The Holy Blessed One, whose presence became manifest in healing and transformation. As Dickens wrote, “it was the spring of hope...we had everything before us.” All things then seemed possible.

I was among the many caught up on this wave. So were the vast majority of those who are now the senior visionaries, teachers, and organizational overseers of the Messianic Jewish movement. We became leaders in our 20s, and have continued on that path for four decades. Despite our many weaknesses and failings, much good fruit has followed from our labor. For us, the 1970s were “the best of times.”

But the 1970s were also “the worst of times.” I was reminded of this last year when watching a CNN series of documentaries on that decade. Six of the episodes focused on the darkness, despair, and folly of that decade. First, Watergate, Nixon, and the ensuing disillusionment with the American political system; second, the dishonorable end of the foolishly begun Vietnam War; third, the explosion of violent urban crime, mass murder, and suicidal cults; fourth, the multiple crises of the Ford and Carter eras, with gas shortages, rampant inflation, the Iranian revolution and the capture of American hostages; fifth, the sexual revolution and the normalization of pornography; and sixth, the emergence of terrorism as a common political tactic in the Middle East, Europe, and America.

These documentaries reminded me of my frame of mind in the early 1970s before I came to believe in Yeshua. I was convinced that I would not live to see my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday—that there would be a nuclear holocaust before the end of the century.

It was truly the best of times, and the worst of times. And perhaps that is not an unusual historical paradox, as it seems at first, but a natural phenomenon. When worldly affairs are in crisis, there is greater openness to new perspectives on reality. There is a greater openness to God, and to audacious visions which are ignored in more tranquil eras.

The 1980's and 90's were decades of institutional consolidation and growth in the Messianic Jewish movement, and of repair and renewal in worldly affairs. The Reagan and Clinton years restored a measure of stability to the American economy and social fabric, and witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, and the consequent end of the Cold War. The Oslo peace process had begun, and it looked as though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might finally be resolved. The apocalyptic fears of the 1970s had dissipated, and one scholar famously wrote of "the end of history"—arguing that human social and political evolution had now reached its final stage, namely, Western liberal democracy.

That pipedream dissolved at the beginning of the new century. We received the first alarm—only a hint of what was to come—with the failure of the Camp David summit and the explosion of the Second Intifada. We were then violently awakened from sleep by the collapse of the Twin Towers. The "worst of times" had returned, with Osama bin Laden as their poster child. From that point on the news became darker every day. The U.S. invaded Iraq, bringing chaos to the Middle East. The photographs from Abu Ghraib tarnished our image abroad, as well as the benign image we had of ourselves. Those of us who had come of age during the Vietnam era felt as though we were reliving a suppressed trauma.

Then came the economic collapse of 2008, with the ensuing jump in unemployment and social dislocation. The first decade of the new millennium ended with "Western liberal democracy" in disarray. It was now evident to all that predictions of history's demise had been premature.

I admit to being a bit of a news junkie. I follow world events avidly. However, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century I turned on the radio each morning with dread, thinking, "what new disaster awaits us today?"

"The worst of times" had returned with a vengeance. But were they also "the best of times"?

The new millennium featured no manifest outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as in the 1970s. Interest in God and religion actually plummeted, especially among young people, as did attendance in churches and synagogues. We saw no movement of thousands of young Jews encountering Yeshua, and entering the Messianic Jewish community. Visible multitudes were not healed and transformed. Was there no good news in this century to accompany the bad news?

There was indeed good news—but this time the powerful work of the Spirit was more subtle. This was not a season to gather worshipping crowds in football stadiums; instead, this was a season to redefine the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people, between the Christian and Jewish traditions.

In March 2000 Pope John Paul II made a pilgrimage to the Land of Israel, visiting Yad Vashem and the Western Wall, and repenting for the way Christians had sinned against the Jewish people through the centuries.

In September 2000 a group of Jewish academics published in the New York Times a statement entitled *Dabru Emet*, which called for Jews to recognize the remarkable change that had taken place in Christians attitudes toward Judaism, and to adjust their own attitudes towards the Church accordingly. *Dabru Emet* was signed by over 200 leading rabbis and intellectuals from all branches of Judaism.

In June 2001 the ecumenical Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology sponsored a conference of Jewish and Christian theologians on the theme “Jews and Christians: People of God.” Participants included two of the five authors of *Dabru Emet*. At that conference Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, founder of the journal *First Things*, offered the following reflection on what he saw happening in Jewish-Christian dialogue in our day: “Providential purpose in history is a troubled subject...but I suggest that we would not be wrong to believe that *this dialogue...is an essential part of the unfolding of the story of the world.*” I was present at that conference, and a shiver went down my spine when I heard those words. I was convinced that Fr. Neuhaus spoke the truth—and that his words had prophetic power.

2004 saw the publication of Daniel Boyarin’s *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*. This volume presented the contrasting categories of “Judaism” and “Christianity” as artificially constructed by rival parties who rejected the organic interconnection that bound each to the other. Boyarin opened a new window on the study of Jewish-Christian relations which has radically changed the way scholars view this history.

These are only a few snapshots of the dramatic developments occurring in Jewish-Christian relations as the new millennium unfolded. Ice was breaking in waters that had been frozen for almost two thousand years. I believe that this is every bit as extraordinary a work of the Holy Spirit as the Jesus movement, the Charismatic Renewal, and the Messianic Jewish movement of the 1970s. The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was not only “the worst of times”; it was also “the best of times.”

And that brings us to Messianic Jewish Theological Institute. For something new also happened in the Messianic Jewish movement when the new millennium began. The first Hashivenu Forum was held in 1999. MJTI developed out of Hashivenu, and offered its first course in partnership with Fuller Seminary in December 2000.

In 2000 Hashivenu also published a programmatic booklet entitled *The Nature of Messianic Judaism*. The booklet argued that the Messianic Jewish movement needed to view itself as first and foremost a part of the Jewish world, and only by doing so could it fulfill the service it was called to perform for the Christian world. The booklet also argued that Messianic Judaism must draw upon the ever-flowing river of Jewish tradition, interpreted in the light of Messiah Yeshua. Every attempt to construct an exclusively “biblical” Judaism was rooted in self-deception and doomed to failure.

At the 2000 summer conference of the UMJC in Columbus a meeting was called by leaders from the New England region. Out of that meeting emerged a group which would later become the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council.

Three intertwined Messianic Jewish institutions thus arose at the beginning of the new millennium, at the very same time as Pope John Paul II was praying at the Western Wall, and the authors of *Dabru Emet* were publishing their statement in the New York Times.

I am convinced that this chronological correlation is no coincidence. I think this because the vision of MJTI, like the vision of Hashivenu and the MJRC, is intimately bound up with those wider developments in Jewish-Christian relations. It is no coincidence that three MJTI faculty members play a prominent role in the Messianic Jewish – Roman Catholic Dialogue Group, which had its first meeting in the fall of the year 2000—the very same week that *Dabru Emet* appeared in the New York Times. It is no coincidence that one of our faculty members, Dr. Jen Rosner, has written a powerful book entitled *Healing the Schism: Barth, Rosenzweig, and the New Jewish-Christian Encounter*. It is no coincidence that one of the seminal figures in this encounter from the Jewish side, Michael Wyschogrod (*zichrono livracha*), spent a weekend with teachers and students of MJTI, and delivered a public lecture sponsored by MJTI at the Skirball Center in Los Angeles. It is no coincidence that the seminal figure in the related historiographical revolution, Daniel Boyarin, spoke at the synagogue led by the President of MJTI, Rabbi Rich Nichol.

MJTI, like Hashivenu and the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, embodies a vision of Messianic Judaism that fits the extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit in this new millennium. Many of the texts studied by students in MJTI are written by authors associated with what Rosner has aptly termed “The New Jewish-Christian Encounter.” The approach to Messianic Judaism advanced by the faculty and the curriculum of MJTI views our movement not as an end in itself but as a sign of God’s faithfulness to and passionate love for the ruptured people of God. MJTI refuses to compromise on its commitment and devotion to Yeshua, on its loyalty to the Jewish people and its living tradition, or on the honor it shows to a repentant Church.

I am convinced that MJTI, like Hashivenu and the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council, is an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit, as momentous as the birth of the Messianic Jewish movement in the 1970s. Today we only see the humble beginnings of something whose true significance remains hidden. As with the “New Jewish-Christian Encounter” itself, the full import of what is happening here will only become apparent as the century unfolds. But I am convinced that the words of Yeshua are true for us who sit here today: “Blessed are the eyes who see what you see, and who hear what you hear.” For, like the “New Jewish-Christian Encounter,” and like the Messianic Jewish movement of the 1970s, this work of the Holy Spirit is, I believe, “*an essential part of the unfolding of the story of the world.*”

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

Let us thank Hashem that we live in the worst of times, and let us do all we can to make the best of them.