



Mark Kinzer and Joseph Rabinowitz

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

On the following pages Mark Kinzer's book *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* will be debated and looked at from various angles. Let me open the discussion by asking how Kinzer deals with – and uses – prominent Jesus-believing Jews from the 19th and 20th centuries to support his project of "Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People."

Kinzer mentions four such persons. First and foremost is Joseph Rabinowitz, the founder of the Israelites of the New Covenant (*Bnei Israel*, *Bnei Brit Chadasha*) in Kishinev; then Isak Lichtenstein, Christian Theophilus Lucky (Chajim Jedidjah Pollak), and Paul Levertoff.

Kinzer's book is a systematic work and should be treated as such. Still it is surprising that Kinzer only uses secondary sources when he deals with these important figures in modern Messianic Jewish history. If he has read their primary sources, he does not reveal this in his book. For example he reads Levertoff only through the eyes of Lev Gillet: "Gillet – and, we presume, Levertoff..." he writes [281]. This is unfortunate.

Joseph Rabinowitz – Not Quite "Kosher"

I do, of course, appreciate that Kinzer [273-278] uses my book *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement* (1995), which the frequent references to it show. But how I wish that Kinzer had taken time to struggle with the primary sources and had even found others than those mentioned in my book.

With that said, Kinzer should be commended for not hiding from his readers that he – based on the secondary material – finds things in Rabinowitz's theology and practice that he cannot use to support his own program. In conclusion, he says:

How does the Rabinowitz program match up with our five ecclesiological principles? First, Rabinowitz emphatically affirms Israel's enduring covenant and election. Second, he likewise affirms the enduring importance of Jewish practice, though his attitude towards the obligatory quality of that practice remains ambiguous. Third, he denies the value and validity of rabbinic tradition. Fourth, he takes

the initial steps toward the formation of a bilateral ecclesiology. Fifth, though he demonstrates a radical solidarity with the Jewish people, his ecclesiology still reflects a missionary orientation in its disregard for historical Jewish religious experience and its focus on Israel entering the (universal) church (without a corresponding emphasis on the church joining Israel). [277-278]

Kinzer here makes it clear that Rabinowitz is not quite “kosher.” The question is whether Rabinowitz is so “non-kosher” as to refute Kinzer’s program rather than support it.

It is surprising that the issues in Rabinowitz’s theology which do not live up to Kinzer’s program play hardly any role in the discussion on the following pages. Neither do the differences which existed between Rabinowitz and the others mentioned above. As it appears now, Rabinowitz, Lichtenstein, Lucky, and Levertoff stand as one group, supporting Kinzer’s cause. He can even say:

Citing Hugh Schonfeld’s statement of 1936, Kjær-Hansen calls Rabinowitz “the Herzl of Jewish Christianity.” In light of the developments of the last three decades, Rabinowitz could now be called “the Herzl of the Messianic Jewish movement.” [292]

I stand behind my statement. Of course I believe that Rabinowitz has been of enormous importance for the Messianic movement – broadly understood. I do, however, find it problematic when Kinzer defines Rabinowitz “in light of the last three decades.” By doing this, does Kinzer take the “soul” out of Rabinowitz and what he stood for at the end of the 19th century?

That circumcision and keeping the Sabbath and Jewish holidays were precious practices for Rabinowitz is not open for discussion. But in order to understand Rabinowitz one must also consider what else he stood for. Otherwise we end up with an amputated Rabinowitz.

Briefly, and with reference to Kinzer’s five above-mentioned ecclesiological principles:

1. However “Israel’s enduring covenant and election” was understood by Rabinowitz, Israel does – according to Rabinowitz – need Jesus Messiah. Israel will die in its sins if she does not turn to God and believe in Jesus, the Son of God. This is fundamental for Rabinowitz’s theology and practice. He makes this clear in public speaking and in writing. They need Jesus! By stating this, Rabinowitz loses the recognition he previously had in Jewish circles.

2. It is completely correct that Rabinowitz wanted to hold on to circumcision, Sabbath, and the celebration of Jewish holidays. From a “patriotic” or national point of view he felt obligated to keep the Law as far as circumstances made it possible. But this is subordinate to religious liberty.



Kinzer finds that this is “incomplete because it fails to deal with the complementary theme (also prominent in Rabinowitz’s writings) of Jewish obligation” [275]. Kinzer expresses this viewpoint by saying:

Thus, in making a distinction between religious and national obligations, Rabinowitz retains the belief that Jewish practice is divinely commanded and obligatory for Jews while portraying the nature of that commandment/obligation as qualitatively different from and lesser than the essential “moral” commandments/obligations.

This fundamental question about “freedom” or “obligation” can hardly be dealt with any further without a closer reading of Rabinowitz’s writing, and especially what he meant by “The Messiah is the end of the law” (cf. Rom 10:4). In his first worship hall there was a Torah scroll with this inscribed in Hebrew. What does this indicate? And can we imagine something similar in a Messianic congregation today?

3. In sharp contrast to Kinzer’s program Rabinowitz – in strong terms – writes off the Mishna and Talmud and Shulchan Aruch; these “have darkened our eyes so that we failed to see the ways of the true and life-giving Faith.” Kinzer does not hide this from his readers.

Although there is more to say about Rabinowitz’s relationship to rabbinic tradition, Rabinowitz takes a different direction than the one Kinzer argues for.

4. That Rabinowitz “takes the initial steps towards the formation of a bilateral ecclesiology” is not very clear when – according to Kinzer [24] – a bilateral ecclesiology not only affirms Israel’s *covenant* and *Torah*, but also affirms Israel’s *religious tradition* (cf. 2).

5. Kinzer writes that Rabinowitz demonstrates “a radical solidarity with the Jewish people.” I agree. He is and remains a Jew. This “radical solidarity” is expressed not least in the fact that Israel needs to hear the Gospel of Jesus in order to be saved. That one could be a Jesus-believing Jew without being part of the universal Christian church is beyond the horizons of Rabinowitz’s thought. His activities are driven by his desire for his people: that they will hear about Jesus and receive him in faith.

Let All the House of Israel Know

When he deals with Jews for Jesus, Kinzer writes, among other things: “Thus Jews for Jesus is much less radical in vision than Rabinowitz” [290]. I ask: Could Jews for Jesus today be much more “missionary” than the following examples?

Sommerville Memorial Hall was dedicated at the end of 1890, and was used for services until Rabinowitz’s death in 1899. Along the side of the hall, facing the street, were written these words from Acts 2:36, in Hebrew

and Russian: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." The same words were to be written on the railway coach which Rabinowitz planned to build in 1897. His plan for railway evangelization was never realized. Had the project been carried out, it would have taken him far and wide in Russia.

This was also Rabinowitz. And I find it difficult to fit such a Rabinowitz into Kinzer's program.

Joseph's Misfortune

Of course Rabinowitz's theological viewpoints should be understood primarily from his creeds, his theological writings, and his sermons. But Rabinowitz's "soul" and the heart of what he stood for are found in some of the stories for which he was so well known in his time. Here is an example:

The misfortune of my people has always been on my heart. I have also tried various remedies to relieve it, but all has been in vain.

When a doctor comes to a patient, he first has to question the patient closely before he can prescribe a remedy for the disease. He feels the pulse, presses here and there, asking all the time: "Does it hurt here?" "Is there pressure there?" "Have you pain here?" But not until the doctor touches the tender spot, does a really clear answer come from the patient. The pain squeezes the words from him, "Don't press so hard, it hurts!"

That was my experience when I concerned myself with my people's sufferings. I have in vain pressed various places. As I was not striking the tender spot, there was hardly any answer.

If I said, "The Talmud and all rabbinical extraneous matter do not come, as is claimed, from Sinai, but they are human matters full of wisdom and unwisdom," then these words made little impression upon my people.

If I said, "Nor does the Tanakh (the Old Testament) contain anything other than human words, unproven stories, and unbelievable miracles," then all the time I remained the respected Rabinowitz; that did not cause my people any pain either.

My people remained calm when I placed Moses on an equal footing with the conjurers of our day; it did not hurt them when I called the same Moses an impostor. Indeed, I might even deny God without my people uttering a single sound of pain.

But when I returned from the Holy Land with the glad news: Jesus is our brother, then I struck the tender spot. A scream of pain could be heard and resounded from all sides, "Do not press, do not touch that, it hurts!" Well, it does hurt: But you must know, my people, that that is indeed your illness; you lack nothing but your brother Jesus. Your illness consists precisely in your not having him. Receive him and you will be healed of all your sufferings.

