

Reflections on Rabbi W.A. Matthew

by

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Chief Rabbi W.A. Matthew was the person most responsible for us knowing our G-d and ourselves. Therefore it is fitting that we celebrate the 118th anniversary of his birth as an expression of love and gratitude. The Torah commands us to “honor our fathers and our mothers.” (Ex 20:12) One section of the Talmud that is dedicated to preserving the words and legacy of the ancient sages of Israel is called the “Ethics of the Fathers.” (אבות) Therefore, great teachers are our fathers and Torah requires that we honor them.

The program this year inaugurates what will be an annual celebration. Our current commemoration seeks to emphasize the fact that when Rabbi Matthew opened that first place of worship in 1919, it was not only the start of a single congregation, it was the birth of an entire community that now has roots all over the world. Moreover, when he established what would eventually become the Israelite Academy of the International Israelite Board of Rabbis, he was establishing a spiritual and intellectual tradition as the beating heart of this community. “We who are alive this day” walk in his footsteps as we attempt to study, practice, and teach the laws of the Creator to his people Israel. Though he had mentors like Rabbi Arnold J. Ford who granted him rabbinic ordination from Ethiopia in 1931, Rabbi Matthew faced a world the we can hardly imagine. He was a black man born in the nineteenth century when the shadow of slavery still hung heavily over the lives of black people. He was a poor immigrant to America at a time when xenophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, the Great Depression, and the Second World War placed unbelievable limits on what he could do and a tragically low ceiling on what a person of his genius could achieve. When put in its proper historical context, Rabbi Matthew’s accomplishments under these circumstances are truly miraculous. This is why we believe that he was chosen by Hashem¹ to be an instrument in the regathering¹ of the Children of Israel from the four corners of the earth.

Like our great founder, we have a deep respect and admiration for every other Jewish community. We continue to learn and benefit from the treasures of knowledge that are available to us. However, Rabbi Matthew also understood that those who Hashem are bringing back as He promised to do through the words of the prophets, have a special role to play in the ultimate restoration of Israel. As such, we are not empty vessels before a full fountain; i.e., a people who enters Judaism with nothing to contribute. On the contrary, we have the spirit that will breath new life into the dry bones. We bring an innate intelligence that allows us to understand and apply Torah to the world in which we live. We occupy a special place in the heart of the Creator, the lost child who has been found and returned. And, we bring a creativity and an independence that allows us to shape and mold our own culture, songs, dress, and traditions from all the sources that make up our identity.

Over the decades the seed that Rabbi Matthew originally planted has grown to reach many different places. The problem has been that over time some of these branches have changed their shape slightly or sprouted limbs of their own. Now some of us need to be reminded that we come from the same tree. We are all brothers and sisters. Often if one of Rabbi Matthew students started

congregations on their own there might be some tension, animosity, or fear that the new synagogue would be competition rather than a badly needed addition. The Korachs who are always among us was the evil tongue to widen divisions rather than build bridges. Just as in Biblical days, constant “murmuring” keeps us in the wilderness. What Rabbi Matthew understood is that growth often requires sacrifice. Spiritual growth required purging ourselves of false doctrines. Rabbi Matthew always pursued that path even when it cost him members who wanted to remain with their old ways of thinking and worshipping. Similarly, when a new congregation opened, such as Beth Shalom in 1967, Rabbi Matthew personally came to give his blessing. Moreover Rabbi Matthew “allowed” members of Commandment Keepers to join Beth Shalom in order to establish the congregation. Some of the earliest families at Beth Shalom started at Commandment Keepers such as the Pilgram family, Manott Family, Watts Family, etc. This was a tremendous act of altruism. If he had not allowed his students such as Rabbi Yisrael, Rabbi Moses, Rabbi Samuel, Rabbi L.B. Levy, and Rabbi Yehonatan to leave his congregation, Commandment Keepers would have been larger, but our community would have been smaller, weaker, and more vulnerable. And, as a consequence, Bnai Adath, Mt. Horeb, Beth Shalom, Beth Ha-Tefilah, Beth Elohim, Hashabah Yisrael, Sh’ma Yisrael and many other congregations in New York, Chicago, and other parts of the world might never have come into existence. How many leaders today are willing to put the needs of the community first as he did?

Rabbi Matthew was a true man of courage. He made difficult and costly decisions. If we could ask him “What was the hardest decisions you ever had to make as a leader?” he might answer (1) not allowing even a Jewish Jesus into the theology of our community—even though his movement would have grown faster as a church than as a synagogue and (2) on the other hand, not surrendering the autonomy of our community to Orthodox Jews who influenced but not controlled his thinking. In this regard Rabbi Matthew was not motivated by ego or a fear of losing control, instead he preserved a sense of agency for our people in the unfolding of history. We were making choices about our destiny rather than attempting to mimic the choices that other people have made on a set of rabbinic issues. These two decisions largely explain our unique position today. I believe with perfect faith that they were the right decisions then and they are still right for us now. This shows that Rabbi Mathew was a man of vision, a person whose wisdom is appreciated more after his death than it was during his life.

Finally, our ability to honor him is a measure of our strength and maturity. Weak people fear empowering those around them. Insecure people are envious and treacherous. Lifting him up does not put us down because he was one of us and we are his children. A community that does not have role models, that does not have revered leaders, and venerable teachers is a community that does not see greatness within itself. Through these series of programs we honor our G-d, we honor our founder, we honor our youth, . . . and we honor ourselves.

¹ Hashem is a Hebrew phrase meaning “the name.” It refers to the most holy name of G-d that we dare not speak.