



## Paul Lippi



After his theology studies at Andrews University, Paul Lippi went to the Hebrew University

of Jerusalem where he did post-graduate studies and worked under Prof. Emanuel Tov, the famous expert on the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Paul lived in Israel for 23 years and served the Jewish-Adventist community in Jerusalem as a pastor. He is presently the director of the Shalom Learning Center in Florida, a center devoted to the preparation of materials and lay people for Jewish-Christian ministry.

**S***habbat Shalom: As an Adventist who lived more than twenty years in Israel and studied at the Hebrew University with Jewish students, what did you learn from your relationship that has affected/enriched your religious views, and even helped you become a better Adventist?*

**Paul Lippi:** What amazes me about Israel is the extent to which non-scholars have an active interest in Bible interpretation. Biblical turns of phrase are embedded in everyday conversation; the different ways to take what the Bible says is part of pop culture. For somebody coming from a faith community where linguistic interpretation and popular religion are totally compartmentalized, and hardly on speaking terms, Israeli society is music to the ears.

Adventists need to learn from Jewish people that just because you openly discuss some linguistic or textual difficulty in the Bible, God is not going to suddenly disappear between the cracks. His presence among us is thankfully not that fragile. If another way of looking at familiar data forces us to re-construe certain passages, “everything we’ve always believed in” doesn’t go down the tube. Because God is gracious, He allows us to adjust our position without withdrawing His gift of faith.

*Because God is gracious, He allows us to adjust our position without withdrawing His gift of faith.*

***Shabbat Shalom: How do you see the future of the***

## **Jewish-Adventist connection and by implication the future of Adventism in relation to Protestant tradition?**

**Lippi:** I think with the passing of time as the cultural center of Adventism shifts away from North America, we will continue to distance ourselves from the Protestant tradition. Our movement began among white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and in certain respects WASP cultural assumptions prevented our pio-

*Torah is a vibrant, life-giving message that seeks expression.*

neers from grasping Bible truth. Until very recently, the central authority of Adventism has been North American culture. Of course, Adventism had access to the Bible all along, but it was the Bible contextualized to WASP religion. As the Adventist family becomes more diverse, it becomes easier to face these inherited assumptions for what they are and correct our teaching in the light of God's Word. It seems God has always used social change to lead His people into truth. We see this process at work in Acts chapter 15. Conservative leadership was clinging to an outmoded paradigm of conversion until forced by the situation on the ground to change their theological understanding. Theology develops as it scrambles to keep pace with social reality; by playing catch-up we come up with the truth. This process is taking place right now in the area of Adventist-Jewish relations. The question of Israel's place in the closing events of this world's history is no longer a theologi-

## *We are more guilty of theoretical anti-Semitism than personal animosity.*

cal abstraction. Social reality is forcing us to rethink our spiritual treasure in a non-Christian context. Since we are pragmatists, rather than attentive students of the Word, we are more responsive to God's activity in our midst than to His voice in Scripture.

Having said this, I don't see Adventism drawing nearer to Judaism as an end in itself. Both Judaism and Christianity are forms of institutionalized disobedience. Instead of correcting the tragic separation of true worshipers into mutually antagonistic parties, we have justified our sins and built doctrines around them. Because the origin of Christianity is the rejection of Torah, the reformation of Christianity at best can only bring us closer to our original sin. Christianity and Judaism are both mistakes. While God has graciously continued to make Himself known within both traditions, neither fully represents the biblical Revelation.

Thinking eschatologically, the remnant "who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Yeshua" cannot be comprised exclusively of adherents either of Judaism or of Christianity. Judaism has preserved the biblical dynam-

scend the historical limitations of Judaism and of Christianity. To do so, both traditions will need to borrow back from each other truths they have forfeited by disobedience. I don't think many Adventists today understand the ramifications of the remnant, because we continue to identify exclusively with Christianity.

### *Shabbat Shalom:*

**Considering this special connection, do we find anti-Semitism among Adventists? If yes, how do you explain this paradox?**

**Lippi:** Historically speaking, the core of Christian self-understanding and self-definition is the rejection of Israel. In practice, however, Adventists are an ethnically diverse group of people who sincerely believe that every form of racism or prejudice is a grave sin. The anti-Semitism I've encountered among Adventists is more a matter of insensitivity and ignorance than of malicious intent. I've never encountered a rabid Adventist anti-Semite, but I do know of Jewish people who've left our fellowship because they couldn't handle the incessant anti-Semitism from our pulpits and in our publications. We are more guilty of indifference than

## *Both Judaism and Adventism embrace Torah.*

ics of obedience to God's commandments, but defines itself to exclude the testimony of Yeshua. Christianity holds to the testimony of Yeshua, but is not biblically obedient to Him. The end-time remnant who proclaim the eternal gospel by necessity must tran-

scend the historical limitations of Judaism and of Christianity. To do so, both traditions will need to borrow back from each other truths they have forfeited by disobedience. I don't think many Adventists today understand the ramifications of the remnant, because we continue to identify exclusively with Christianity.

right in practice. You can relate to God on a personal level in a wholesome way while entertaining all sorts of erroneous notions. This, of course, doesn't excuse us from the sacred obligation of correcting our bad theology. Our goal should be for our talk and our walk to someday agree, and for both to accord with God's revealed will for our lives.

**Shabbat Shalom:** In your view, what are the most significant features of Adventism that draw it close to Judaism?

**Lippi:** Both Judaism and Adventism embrace Torah. Adventism has constructed a beautiful theology, which integrates Torah obedience into their thinking. We've escaped the Christian error of antinomianism, but we haven't escaped the Christian exegetical and linguistic tradition, which still prevents the biblical data from informing our understanding of the Torah.

*We are the first sizeable group of Gentiles since the first century who've delighted in God's Torah!*

We are the first sizeable group of Gentiles since the first century who've delighted in God's Torah! This potentially could be common ground with Jewish people if only we learned to talk about it in biblical terms.

**Shabbat Shalom:** How do you explain this particular connection?

**Lippi:** I can only attribute it to the Spirit's leading in the Advent movement, because historically there was no dialogue between our Adventist pioneers and Jewish people.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Are the Jews aware of their connection with Adventists?

**Lippi:** In my experience,

most North American Jews have heard of Seventh-day Adventists, but most Israelis haven't. As far as the Israeli scene goes, we're not on the map yet. Now as for how those who recognize us perceive us, that's another matter. I have only anecdotal knowledge, but the perception seems to be superficial and quite negative. In the main, I think we're perceived as a group of Christians who've hijacked certain defining symbols which Jewish people feel belong to them. So long as Seventh-day Adventists continue to define themselves exclusively within a Christian framework, it will be difficult for Jewish people to pick up on their connection with us. It's hard for Jewish people to look past our Christianity long enough to appreciate us in our own right. Stereotyping isn't something that only we suffer from; there's Jewish stereotyping too, you know.

**Shabbat Shalom:** Are

**Adventists aware of their connection with Jews?**

**Lippi:** Unless they happen to have Jewish spouses or in-laws, most Adventists don't connect with Jews. Adventists, of course, are aware of biblical Jews, because Adventists read about them in their Bible. Most Adventists seem to assume the last good thing that came from the Jews is Jesus and after Him God had no further need for Jews. Adventists seem unaware of the post-biblical Jewish contribution that historically made the Protestant Reformation possible. In the Middle Ages, Christianity borrowed back the Hebrew Bible from Judaism along with all the cultural resources

necessary for making sense out of it (the art of historical-literary interpretation, grammatical analysis, lexicography, the tradition of pronunciation). Since they can't read the Bible for themselves, Adventists are unaware that these Jewish contributions are actually what make their Christian translations possible.

**Shabbat Shalom:** What could Jews learn from Adventists that may help them become better Jews?

**Lippi:** The Jewish people need to recover their missionary zeal. The historical reason why the Jewish religion for the most part ceased recruitment among non-Jews is understandable, but in a secular world that trend needs to be reversed. The old reasons are no longer valid; in most countries the practice of Judaism is no longer proscribed and suppressed. Jewish faith needs the exercise of direct confrontation with heathendom. Judaism has developed too much as a negative reflex of Christianity; Judaism needs to get out of the reactive mode, get out from under the Christian shadow, and recover its own authentic voice. As Adventists we can't imagine personal faith confined only to our own families—faith that doesn't reach out to others in darkness and extend the kingdom of Heaven. Jewish people shouldn't have their spiritual life confined either. Torah is a vibrant, life-giving message that seeks expression. The missionary impulse is healthy and normal, and shouldn't be considered foreign to the spirit of Judaism. During Second Temple times, bringing proselytes "under the wings of the Shekina" was a very Jewish thing; and it should be again.