

Statement of Faith

(Longer Version)

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Who am I? What do I believe? Why should anybody care?

I never wanted to be a Jewish Christian writer. I wanted to be a writer who was a Jewish Christian. Sometimes choices are made for us by others.

It's annoying to me that anybody needs to believe in anything...*don't you think?* Shouldn't we simply know what is and isn't? I'd certainly prefer it that way. Yet, as time moves on, and the human race ages, we cut the slices of the theological pie narrower and narrower. No, not because it's too sweet or bad for the diet. But, because we can...and so we do.

A part of our human nature needs/desires to recognize and appreciate something profound. Some of us settle for ourselves – seeing that we're profound enough. (I've heard those people sleep well at night, too.) I'm one of the other sorts, the kind which think something's out there. This complicates life, for you see this "something" ain't the exact same "something" the guy down the street, or on the other side of the world believes is out there.

So, what's my slice of the God pie look like? Well, I'll tell you what it tastes like – bitter and sweet. The texture? Strong and flimsy. The smell? When I catch the aroma, it's good and I like it. The sound? Deafening and often times uncomfortably silent. How big is it? Depending on the day – too big or barely noticeable.

You see, I'm one of the millions of people who occasionally wish that the Creator consulted with me first. No, not about round or triangle-shaped planets – I like round, round works for me, it was a good idea. It's the other things. And every day, everyone else has these "things" too.

I suppose in another world where differences in the belief of God exist, such differences would complement the others. Instead of too many cooks in the kitchen destroying the stew, the additions would improve the good work of others. The differences improve the understanding and educate. Such is a quaint idea, I know.

We'd prefer the "owner" of the kitchen be a better supervisor of the goings on. Consistent good quality stew and plenty of it – that's what we want! Then again, that's like wanting a triangular shaped planet.

In the game of musical chairs of who-is-in and who-is-out, which is where we find ourselves, religion has been a disastrous game. Read my Visits to Heaven #3 on the website's In Progress Page.

That is why being a Jew who believes Yeshua (Jesus) was/is the Jewish Messiah is confounding, awkward and at times downright embarrassing. Christendom's centuries old portrayal of the world's Lord and Savior as a Jew-less Jew is mind-boggling to me. It is only in recent decades that the musical game of chairs has inserted an extra seat for the Jewish Christian. Centuries' ago, the opposite happened. Bewildered and doubtful Jews found themselves pressed to add a chair for non-Jews. In the long era to follow, the descendants of the Jewish apostles and New Covenant writers (Luke was a convert to Messianic Judaism) found themselves with nowhere to sit. The curious sect of Judaism started by a Galilean rabbi evolved into a myriad of variations – each probably with an ugly past or present.

So why would a Jew with more than a lick of sense, pride for his past, and esteem for contemporary Jewish cultural heritage and who smiles at the creation of the nation of Israel – CONVERT!?! *How much time do you have, hmm?*

Actually, as I see it, I didn't convert from Judaism to Christianity. I converted from a hippie lifestyle to a religious one.

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What's most difficult for me is that everyone believes they're right. Some will die and kill for what they believe. Others? Never.

Another difficulty is when two people are presented with the same set of facts, three different conclusions are drawn. Only two? C'mon now!

On a good day, religion can be compared to a noisy jet-skier on an otherwise peaceful lake on a sunny summer day. The person on the water-borne motorcycle is enjoying their chosen pleasure while disturbing the more pleasant, un-motorized set. For me, I prefer a canoe, kayak, fins and maybe a mask and snorkel.

True, this is a lousy comparison to say...the Spanish Inquisitions or well...take your pick. But, because the jet-skier is doing what he wants and I chose to do something

else, this creates a conflict. The jet-skier and canoe paddler are both there for one reason which both can agree on – they enjoy the water.

Religion on planet Earth is a dilemma which literally is an extremely uncomfortable one for me. I'd rather not be "religious."

Living in the West, means following any faith makes you an oddity. In other regions of the world, the predominance of religion is what people know and expect. America was that way for awhile – some good some bad. The Europeans brought here a religion rooted in Judaism and the Middle East. Our original settlers and colonies set about battling "who got it right better." Patriotic Jews got persecuted from the start.

In conclusion. I am not a world traveler nor claim to understand and be knowledgeable of world history and religions – there's just too much to know. But, in 36 years of following one religion, I'm amazed at how much contradiction runs through the human race. One scholar says this and another says that. The more I've learned, the more tragic it's all become. The lake has gotten smaller for me. Those using the water for various recreational activities have cluttered it up. Accidents and more often than not, deliberate collisions occur. Yes, there are life guards on the shore and marine patrols, but the traffic is overwhelming. I am sickened by religion. Our human race races for superiority over one another in politics, economics and religion.

Who is right, who is wrong, who's confused and who will end this destructive cycle? Both Judaism and Christianity believe only HaShem's Messiah can. I waddle behind that throng and grumble.

An Extra Glimpse at My Personal Story

I grew up in a home with only one half of the Bible. In 1976, at 20 years of age, somehow I did what no Jew was to ever do. I became a Christian. Though my parents were patriotic to Israel, and cultural Jews, rather than routinely religious ones, I did grow-up attending a *shul* or synagogue. I had learned to read Hebrew, but not necessarily know what the words meant.

Today, I know the Bible—both halves. I used to...well, that is, I was raised to think only one half of it should be bothered with—no matter what the other, smaller half contained. I didn't know what was in it, but knew enough not to care. One day, I found the contents of those misplaced pages, right next to our holy scriptures (the Tenakh), by non-Jewish publishers, bound into one so-called book: The Bible. What was up with that?

I knew that I shouldn't listen to such followers who read and carried around this kind of Bible. Apparently, they believed made up stories about a pushy, renegade Jew who crossed too many lines and got what he deserved: crucifixion. By his martyrdom he somehow achieved the title: Lord and Savior. Those "saved" types, muddled, mis-matched and re-fashioned our religion doing an entire makeover of what they called the "Old Testament." If you catch the drift, "old" implies or requires the need for some kind of replacement, like a "new" testament! Somehow this all made perfect sense to Christians, while they affronted Jewish heritage, traditions and a boat load of sagely, rabbinical teaching.

Not only were they content with this, they wanted us to join their side! How out of touch can you be? We were "we" and Christians were "them." Simple.

At the age of 14 around Christmastime, I remember my father and I watching a highly-respected nightly news program, the Huntley-Brinkley Report. One of the newsmen reported a holiday story with a surprising note. Apparently, Jesus Christ was considered a historical figure, and not the long-haired, bearded, sandal-clad, fairy tale character from Christianland. I never knew that he really lived!

While researching for this Introduction, I had a family question, so I emailed an older cousin. In discussing our common roots, he told me that our mutual grandfather's given name was Abraham. I find this twist so ironic. I had always known him to be Al, short for Albert. He lived 1893—1989. The biblical man, Abraham, is referred to as Avraham Avinu (Abraham Our Father), and the first Hebrew. No doubt my grandfather changed his name in order to not be easily identified as a Jew when seeking employment. My father had done the same with his *last* name (before my birth). Some years into my adulthood I changed my last name Gaines, back to our family's original name, Golden.

Recently I had a DNA test done to peek into my supposed heritage. No surprise the results showed I am 95% European and East European Jewish. One of my great-grandparents was a rabbi—an extreme Jew. Three of my grandparents came to America from the Ukraine, one further back, from Poland. They loosened up from the lifestyle and rituals of what made Jews a product of the Old World. My relatives trimmed back observing halakhah (Jewish religious and civil laws) and traditions. So, my parents had a watered down Judaism. Then, I and my sibling had something of a take-it-or-leave-it Judaism. My children's generation barely got that.

After my Bar Mitzvah ceremony at age 13, like most of my peers, I drifted away from a Jewish religious identity, only heritage and culture remained. Famous movie star, director, writer and producer, Woody Allen or perhaps it was Mel Brookes, said, "I love being Jewish, but I have nothing to do with the Jewish religion!" This is still true today of over a million American Jews.

After age 14, for the next 6 years or so, I investigated what others believed. For five years I used the typical illegal drugs with my peers—and arrested twice. This was a growing up time for me and a solo journey too. I shared my self-exploration with friends. I found people chose what currently fancied them: the face on Mars, UFOs, reincarnation, meditation, ESP,

ancient treasures waiting for their unearthing or simply some kind of a cult, eastern religions, or conspiracies and cover-ups. Truth took on a variety of legends, teachers and books. But, Christianity was a no-no. That was in my blood; practically written in blood. That was a different culture; made up of gentiles—they were the *other team*, the ‘them’ so to speak.

Back to 1976. While summer hitchhiking in Oregon, I visited a high school friend from Los Angeles. I noticed a paperback book called, *Good News for Modern Man*. This turned out to be a Christian, New Testament book of some sort. In my 20 years I never held or flipped through one of these. In this casual, slow-paced setting I went outside, sat down and opened it. The titles, chapters and names meant little to me and I didn’t intend on reading much. I noticed the Gospel of Mark—my name! That made my choice easy. I read all 16 short chapters.

So, at age twenty, I read a little of the New Testament for the first time. Only then did I understand that Christians believed Jesus Christ was *our* Jewish Messiah!

After summer I attended college and lived with my parents. They had stopped attending synagogue years ago. Truly, full of fear and worry, I informed them of my sudden religious decision and commitment. My parents were embarrassed and ashamed. Loud debates and arguments took place. Looking back, I think I didn’t know much of what I was talking about, and they knew far less of what they were talking about. Their anger about my decision? I’d been foolishly led—by the other side—to join the centuries’ old enemies of the Jewish people—of which my parent’s experienced some. To them, I, like Elvis, had “left the building.”

Disappointing my parents reminded me of Jesus’ words. “I have come to bring division; father against son, wife against husband.” I lived it. I lived it for years. I was the son and the only one in the mostly Jewish neighborhood who took a wrong turn.

I don’t regret my conversion from hippiedom to a religious lifestyle. I made a serious and unexpected decision which still causes my lifestyle to evolve.

At age 22, after two years of trying to live as an American-style disciple of Christ, I thought God compelled me to attend a particular Christian theology school. This institution was one hour from my parent’s house in Los Angeles. I left home and moved near the school. My parents adamantly told me, “We will never visit you. If you have any trouble we will not help you. And, if you become a preacher—we will disown you and never speak with you again!” Those unbending declarations did loosen up in time; partly I was their only child who lived locally and later, because I never did go into the ministry.

They told their friends, all Jewish, that I moved away because I had taken a job in my trade—partially true. I attended theology school at night.

In 2010 at age 54, I stood in Jerusalem for the first time. I traveled there by myself. No guided tour. Once I had arrived in Israel, I said to myself many times over, “I’m in Jerusalem, it really does exist!”

I discovered that the Arabs looked at me and knew I was Hebrew. The Jews knew, too. Something about my race had inherent trace elements I didn't know I'd packed with the luggage—my DNA. Some might call it my spiritual DNA. They looked, reading me in an instant. Back home in America, I was just me, white-skinned, balding brown hair and a reddish beard. Now, I knew how a black man felt in a white church. I was spooked. Sadly, I learned I shouldn't visit Palestinian-controlled Bethlehem or Jericho, without expecting danger. I didn't need danger. And my U.S. passport wouldn't stop a Palestinian bullet.

I went to the Old City, the heartbeat of Jerusalem. I gazed at the broad Kotel (Hebrew for The Wall), also called the Western or Wailing Wall. I brought with me a Bar Mitzvah gift from my parents, a fine but yellowing, blue and white, silk prayer shawl. When I packed for this month-long trip, I felt God nudge me to bring it. Although I had misgivings of traveling with this sentimental, 40 year-old item. First, I feared the possibility of theft or loss of luggage. Second, I rarely wore it anyway. Third, limited room in my luggage—I carried a large backpack, a day knapsack and a small soft bag. This way I could be mobile on my feet.

The silly thing was, where else on earth would be more appropriate and meaningful to put on my prayer shawl and pray, than Jerusalem (Yerushalayim)? Only when I stood before that ancient, massive, retaining wall, with its row upon row of huge cut stones and boulders, did I best understand our family's heritage. I pondered my connection to the remaining, mere dust of relatives who lived, bred and died in this foreign country.

I knew that as with any historical site, over the centuries countless people lived and walked by this very spot. Yet, this most meaningful and pivotal stretch of ground to the Jewish religion—only 187 feet wide and 62 feet high above ground—is a landmark of where my ancestors' started. The Kotel is a surprisingly short section of the original 1,500 foot wide west-facing wall and one of four ancient, massive walls. Due to the DNA of my ancestors past and forefathers unknown, I had returned home.

I wondered how many kindred blood relatives, *like me*, traveled from foreign countries, through the centuries, just to stand where I stood to pray. Who was to follow?