“Are we not a Branch of the House of Israel?” (1 Ne. 15:12)

“What am I?” “Why am I here?” “Where am I going?” These are the core questions of humanity. Coming to know and understand the answers to these questions is essential not only to our peace of mind, but also to our eternal salvation.

Wise parents begin early to teach their children about their individual worth and their place in Heavenly Father’s Plan. Many send their kids off with the reminder: “Remember who you are!” as they leave for school, dates, and missions. Primary children learn this principle as they sing the words to “I am a Child of God” every week. The Young Women participate in a weekly declaration that begins: “We are daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us, and we love Him,” and even the Relief Society organization has a Declaration as of 2008 that begins with: “We are beloved spirit daughters of God, and our lives have meaning, purpose and direction.” This emphasis on knowing and understanding who we are, why we are here, and where we are going is a constant in Church teachings and activities, helping to keep us safely anchored to the path that leads to a Christ-centered life and an eventual return to His presence.

Lehi and Nephi also felt the need to constantly remind their posterity about who they were, and what their purpose was in God’s Plan. They were of the House of Israel, and they must never forget what it meant to be a part of that covenant family.

As Nephi returned to his father’s tent after experiencing a panoramic vision of the future, he found his brothers arguing amongst themselves over their father’s dream. When he asked them what they were arguing about “they said: Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive-tree, and also concerning the Gentiles” (1 Ne. 15:7).

Why, out of all of the things Lehi told them he had seen in vision, was this the topic of most concern for the brothers? Their disquiet regarding the olive tree and the Gentiles was a “golden question,” and both Lehi and Nephi took the opportunity to expound upon it. For their family, this allegory was at the heart of the purpose of their lives. It’s the reason why Nephi quoted so much of Isaiah, as illustrated in this verse: “Wherefore I spake unto them, saying: Hear ye the words of the prophet, ye who are a remnant of the house of Israel, a branch who have been broken off; hear ye the words of the prophet, which were written unto all the house of Israel, and liken them unto yourselves, that ye may have hope as well as your brethren from whom ye have been broken off” (1 Ne. 19:24; also 1 Ne. 15:19-20).

In order for us to fully appreciate the teachings and prophecies on this topic, we must come to understand what it means to be of the House of Israel, and we must understand “the promises made to the fathers” (JSH 1:38-39, D&C 2:1-3, Abr. 1:2, Deut.4:31).

Moses declared: “When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel. For the Lord’s portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance” (Deut. 32:8-9).

Bruce R. McConkie taught that while in the Premortal state, “The whole house of Israel, known and segregated out from their fellows, was inclined toward spiritual things” (The Mortal Messiah, 1:23).
The very name of Israel was a symbol of covenant; God had named them, and had called them His own: “For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (Deut. 7:6). They were to be to Him “a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Ex. 19:6).

... But before Israel, there was Abraham, the Father of the Faithful (D&C 138:41). Yet, even Abraham looked to those who had gone before him to find purpose and meaning for his life. Abraham yearned for the “blessings of the fathers,” hearkening all the way back to Adam for his light and example.

Because Abraham’s desires were for righteousness, knowledge, and the right to the Priesthood, the Lord blessed him and led him out of darkness (see Abr. 1-2). The Lord covenanted with Abraham that: “… I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee above measure, and make thy name great among all nations, and thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations; And I will bless them through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father…” (Abr. 2:9-11).

The name of the “great nation” that the Lord made from Abraham is Israel.

President Joseph Fielding Smith said: “Every person who embraces the gospel becomes of the house of Israel. In other words, they become members of the chosen lineage, or Abraham’s children through Isaac and Jacob unto whom the promises were made. The great majority of those who become members of the Church are literal descendants of Abraham through Ephraim, son of Joseph. Those who are not literal descendants of Abraham and Israel must become such, and when they are baptized and confirmed they are grafted into the tree and are entitled to all the rights and privileges as heirs” (Doctrines of Salvation, 3:246; emphasis added).

On another occasion, President Joseph Fielding Smith said: “The Lord said he would scatter Israel among the Gentile nations, and by doing so he would bless the Gentile nations with the blood of Abraham. Today we are preaching the gospel in the world and we are gathering out, according to the revelations given to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets, the scattered sheep of the House of Israel. These scattered sheep are coming forth mixed with Gentile blood from their Gentile forefathers. Under all the circumstances it is very possible that the majority, almost without exception, of those who come into the Church in this dispensation have the blood of two or more of the tribes of Israel as well as the blood of the Gentiles” (Answers to Gospel Questions, 3:63).

The “blessings of the fathers” given to Abraham and his seed (see Abr. 2:2-3) have been hard to fulfill – not because of any neglect on the Lord’s side of the equation, but because the children, or posterity, have so often gone astray. They have forgotten who they are, and they have forgotten the Lord’s promises. Even as the Lord made His covenant with Abraham (Abr. 2:9-11), He warned that Abraham’s posterity would stray, and as a result become captives in Egypt. But Jehovah reassured Abraham that He would bring his children out of the land of Egypt and bring them “hither again” (Gen. 15:13-16). That prophecy was fulfilled, both in bringing the children of Israel back to the land promised to Abraham, but also in bringing them to Mount Sinai, where the Lord intended that they should come unto Him and enter into covenant with Him, as Abraham and “the fathers” had done before them.

When Lehi and his family first left Jerusalem, Nephi, Jacob, and many who followed after still revered and clung to the promises of Abraham. Nephi trusted that although they were so far from their native land, they were “not cast off” from the Lord’s presence, or the covenant: “For behold the Lord God has
led away from time to time from the house of Israel, according to his will and pleasure. And now behold, the Lord remembereth all them who have been broken off, wherefore he remembereth us also” (2 Ne. 10:20-22).

The allegory of the Olive Tree as told in Jacob 5 is the perfect parable for illustrating the Master’s awareness of the tree of Israel and its branches.

Imagine what it would have been like for Lehi’s family to leave the “known world” and embark upon a journey to a new land. All that they had ever understood about covenant and being a covenant-people was linked to staying together with “the Jews” (the only remaining tribe(s) of the House of Israel), and with the temple in Jerusalem. The many feasts and holy days of the Israelite people reminded them that they were God’s covenant people; how could the family of Lehi contemplate these celebrations without the temple and without Jerusalem? History had shown them what had happened when the Ten Tribes were dispersed: they quickly lost their sense of identity, and were assimilated into the local populations.

The children of Israel erred when they restricted the covenant too narrowly to a particular place or people; the Lord’s intent was (and is!) that all of His children would become members of His covenant family. In order to accomplish this, various “branches” of the tree of Israel have been “broken off” and transplanted to diverse “vineyards” throughout the world. Nephi explained that this method of transplanting branches was so that the covenant the Lord made with Abraham might be fulfilled which said: “In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (1 Ne. 15:18).

Nephi attempted to help his brothers to understand the meaning of this part of Lehi’s vision: “Behold, I say unto you, that the house of Israel was compared unto an olive-tree ... and behold are we not broken off from the house of Israel, and are we not a branch of the House of Israel?” (1 Ne. 15:12). This would become a theme that would be oft-repeated, and oft-explained throughout the Book of Mormon.

1 Nephi 15

1 And it came to pass that after I, Nephi, had been carried away in the Spirit, and seen all these things, I returned to the tent of my father.

2 And it came to pass that I beheld my brethren, and they were disputing one with another concerning the things which my father had spoken unto them.

3 For he truly spake many great things unto them, which were hard to be understood, save a man should inquire of the Lord; and they being hard in their hearts, therefore they did not look unto the Lord as they ought.

Today, we might fall into the same trap of trying to “reason things out” logically instead of going to the Lord, and humbly asking that we might receive instruction through the Spirit.

4 And now I, Nephi, was grieved because of the hardness of their hearts, and also, because of the things which I had seen, and knew they must unavoidably come to pass because of the great wickedness of the children of men.

5 And it came to pass that I was overcome because of my afflictions, for I considered that mine afflictions were great above all, because of the destruction of my people, for I had beheld their fall.
Lehi had been overcome with concern for Laman and Lemuel as a result of what he had seen in the vision (1 Ne. 8:35-38). Now, Nephi, likewise is weighed down with grief and frustration over his brothers. He knows that because of the hardness of their hearts, and their stubborn rebellion, great heartache will come to their immediate family, and also to many generations in the future.

6 And it came to pass that after I had received strength I spake unto my brethren, desiring to know of them the cause of their disputations.

7 And they said: Behold, we cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken concerning the natural branches of the olive tree, and also concerning the Gentiles.

8 And I said unto them: Have ye inquired of the Lord?

9 And they said unto me: We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us.

10 Behold, I said unto them: How is it that ye do not keep the commandments of the Lord? How is it that ye will perish, because of the hardness of your hearts?

11 Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said? — If ye will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you.

Nephi saw his family’s journey as a parallel to that of Moses’ and the Children of Israel’s departure from Egypt. He knew that they were being delivered from bondage as surely as had Moses’ people. He noted that the Lord was their “light in the wilderness,” and that they were being led to a promised land (1 Ne. 17:13). He saw in his brothers’ complaints the murmurings of the children of Israel against Moses (1 Ne. 17:23-42). He feared that even as the Lord had had to “straiten” the Israelites “with his rod” because of their hard hearts, destruction would come upon Lehi’s family because of the hardness of Laman and Lemuel (1 Ne. 17:41, 18:20). Likening the parting of the Red Sea to their sailing on a ship of his making, Nephi declared: “If God had commanded me to do all things I could do them. If he should command me that I should say unto this water, be thou earth, it should be earth; and if I should say it, it would be done” (1 Ne. 17:50). Nephi, like Abraham, looked to “the fathers” for his guidance and inspiration.

12 Behold, I say unto you, that the house of Israel was compared unto an olive tree, by the Spirit of the Lord which was in our father; and behold are we not broken off from the house of Israel, and are we not a branch of the house of Israel?

13 And now, the thing which our father meant concerning the grafting in of the natural branches through the fulness of the Gentiles is, that in the latter days, when our seed shall have dwindled in unbelief, yea, for the space of many years, and many generations after the Messiah shall be manifested in body unto the children men, then shall the fulness of the gospel of the Messiah come unto the Gentiles, and from the Gentiles unto the remnant of our seed —
And at that day shall the remnant of our seed know that they are of the house of Israel, and that they are the covenant people of the Lord; and then shall they know and come to the knowledge of their forefathers, and also to the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer, which was ministered unto their fathers by him; wherefore, they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved.

Nephi knew through revelation that his people would dwindle in unbelief. Their future “grafting in to the natural tree” would come through the Gentiles. Perhaps it was the “Gentile” connection that caused Laman and Lemuel added discomfort. In 600 B.C., faithful Jews kept themselves strictly separate from Gentiles. Now, both Lehi and Nephi were telling them that the only hope for their posterity to be brought back into covenant status would be through the ministrations of the Gentiles!

Nephi recorded: “Yea, even my father spake much concerning the Gentiles, and also concerning the house of Israel, that they should be compared like unto an olive-tree, whose branches should be broken off and should be scattered upon all the face of the earth. Wherefore, he said it must needs be that we should be led with one accord into the land of promise, unto the fulfilling of the word of the Lord, that we should be scattered upon all the face of the earth. And after the house of Israel should be scattered they should be gathered together again; or in fine, after the Gentiles had received the fulness of the Gospel, the natural branches of the olive-tree, or the remnants of the house of Israel, should be grafted in, or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer” (1 Ne. 10:12-14).

And then at that day will they not rejoice and give praise unto their everlasting God, their rock and their salvation? Yea, at that day, will they not receive the strength and nourishment from the true vine? Yea, will they not come unto the true fold of God?

Behold, i say unto Yea; they shall be remembered again among the house of Israel; they shall be grafted in, being a natural branch of the olive tree, into the true olive tree.

And this is what our father meaneth; and he meaneth that it will not come to pass until after they are scattered by the Gentiles; and he meant that it shall not come by way of the Gentiles, that the Lord may show his power unto the Gentiles, for the very cause that he shall be rejected of the Jews, or of the house of Israel.

Wherefore, our father hath not spoken of our seed alone, but also of all the house of Israel, pointing to the covenant which should be fulfilled in the latter days; which covenant the Lord made to our father Abraham, saying: In thy seed shall all of the kindreds of the earth be blessed.

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, spake much unto them concerning these things; yea, I spake unto them concerning the restoration of the Jews in the latter days.

And I did rehearse unto them the words of Isaiah, who spake concerning the restoration of the Jews, or of the house of Israel; and after they were restored they should no more be confounded, neither should they be scattered again. And it came to pass that I did speak many words unto my brethren,
that they were pacified and did humble themselves before the Lord.

Nephi used the prophecies of Isaiah to convince his audience that the scattering of Israel and its subsequent gathering through the aid of the Gentiles had always been a part of the Lord’s plan. In some way incomprehensible to the House of Israel in the 600’s B.C., Gentiles would become “nursing fathers and mothers” to help restore them not only to covenant Israel, but to Jerusalem and to the temple (Isa. 49:19-23; 1 Ne. 21: 19-23). Nephi taught “that after all the house of Israel have been scattered and confounded, that the Lord God will raise up a mighty nation among the Gentiles, yea, even upon the face of this land; and by them shall our seed be scattered. And after our seed is scattered the Lord God will proceed to do a marvelous work among the Gentiles, which shall be of great worth unto our seed; wherefore, it is likened unto their being nourished by the Gentiles and being carried in their arms and upon their shoulders” (1 Ne. 22:7-8).

1 Nephi 19

7 For the things which some men esteem to be of great worth, both to the body and soul, others set at naught and trample under their feet. Yea, even the very God of Israel do men trample under their feet; I say, trample under their feet but I would speak in other words — they set him at naught, and hearken not to the voice of his counsels.

8 And behold he cometh, according to the words of the angel, in six hundred years from the time my father left Jerusalem.

9 And the world, because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught; wherefore they scourge him, and he suffereth it; and they smite him, and he suffereth it. Yea, they spit upon him, and he suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men.

10 And the God of our fathers, who were led out of Egypt, out of bondage, and also were preserved in the wilderness by him, yea, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, yieldeth himself, according to the words of the angel, as a man, into the hands of wicked men, to be lifted up, according to the words of Zenock, and to be crucified, according to the words of Neum, and to be buried in a sepulchre, according to the words of Zenos, which he spake concerning the three days of darkness, which should be a sign given of his death unto those who should inhabit the isles of the sea, more especially given unto those who are of the house of Israel.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said of these verses: “At the center of the Father’s plan is Jesus Christ, mankind’s Redeemer. Yet, as foreseen, many judge Jesus ‘to be a thing of naught’ (1 Ne 19:9), or ‘consider him’ merely ‘a man’ (Mosiah 3:9). Whether others deny or delimit Jesus, for us He is our Lord and Savior! Comparatively, brothers and sisters, it matters very little what people think of us, but it matters very much what we think of Him. It matters very little, too, who others say we are; what matters is who we say Jesus is (see Mat. 16:13-17)” (“The Great Plan of the Eternal God,” April 1984 Conference).
11 For thus spake the prophet: The Lord God surely shall visit all the house of Israel at that day, some with his voice, because of their righteousness, unto their great joy and salvation, and others with the thunderings and the lightnings of his power, by tempest, by fire, and by smoke, and vapor of darkness, and by the opening of the earth, and by mountains which shall be carried up.

12 And all these things must surely come, saith the prophet Zenos. And the rocks of the earth must rend; and because of the groaning of the earth, many of the kings of the isles of the sea shall be wrought upon by the Spirit of God, to exclaim: The God of nature suffers.

13 And as for those who are at Jerusalem, saith the prophet, they shall be scourged by all people, because they crucify the God of Israel, and turn their hearts aside, rejecting signs and wonders, and the power and glory of the God of Israel.

14 And because they turn their hearts aside, saith the prophet, and have despised the Holy One of Israel, they shall wander in the flesh, and perish, and become a hiss and a byword, and be hated among all nations.

President Ezra Taft Benson said: “Christian history has emphasized the point that the Jews as a nation rejected their Messiah. Overlooked has been the fact that many Jews did believe him to be the Messiah. among those Jews who did so were his twelve apostles and thousands of other Jews who were converted by their ministry” (“A Message to Judah from Joseph” Ensign, December 1976).

15 Nevertheless, when that day cometh, saith the prophet, that they no more turn aside their hearts against the Holy One of Israel, then will he remember the covenants which he made to their fathers.

16 Yea, then will he remember the isles of the sea; yea, and all the people who are of the house of Israel, will I gather in, saith the Lord, according to the words of the prophet Zenos, from the four quarters of the earth.

17 Yea, and all the earth shall see the salvation of the Lord, saith the prophet; every nation, kindred, tongue and people shall be blessed.

18 And I, Nephi, have written these things unto my people, that perhaps I might persuade them that they would remember the Lord their Redeemer.

19 Wherefore, I speak unto all the house of Israel, if it so be that they should obtain these things.

Elder Maxwell added: “... we appreciate not only the towering divinity of Jesus Christ, but His breathtaking mobility and the scope of His shepherding. The resurrected Jesus revisited the Middle East scene of His mortal messiahship. Then some souls in the Americas (see 3 Ne. 11). And then His other lost sheep (see 3 Ne. 17:4).

“In His selfless plan, the Lord doeth nothing save it be for the benefit of the children of men (see 2 Ne. 26:24). He labors, lovingly and constantly, as Moses and Jeremiah declared, ‘for our good always’ (Deut.
6:24; see also Jer. 32:38-40). In His grand design, His ‘work’ and ‘glory’ are ‘to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man’ (Moses 1:39). Thus, even when we truly learn to love God, we must humbly acknowledge that He loved us first (see 1 John 4:19)” (“The Great Plan of the Eternal God” April 1984 Conference).

20 For behold, I have workings in the spirit, which doth weary me even that all my joints are weak, for those who are at Jerusalem; for had not the Lord been merciful, to show unto me concerning them, even as he had prophets of old, I should have perished also.

21 And he surely did show unto the prophets of old all things concerning them; and also he did show unto many concerning us; wherefore, it must needs be that we know concerning them for they are written upon the plates of brass.

22 Now it came to pass that I, Nephi, did teach my brethren these things; and it came to pass that I did read many things to them, which were engraved upon the plates of brass, that they might know concerning the doings of the Lord in other lands, among people of old.

23 And I did read many things unto them which were written in the books of Moses; but that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning.

24 Wherefore I spake unto them, saying: Hear ye the words of the prophet, ye who are a remnant of the house of Israel, a branch who have been broken off; hear ye the words of the prophet, which were written unto all the house of Israel, and liken them unto yourselves, that ye may have hope as well as your brethren from whom ye have been broken off; for after this manner has the prophet written.

The Lord is faithful to His promises, and although the children of Abraham have wandered, been scattered, and lost any sense of relationship to him, the Lord continues His efforts to draw them back as one to the covenant. Through Nephi, the Lord declared: “... I am God, and ... I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever” (2 Ne. 29:14; see Ex. 2:24; Lev. 26:42; Ps. 105:42).

President Russell M Nelson taught: “This doctrine of gathering is one of the important teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Lord has declared: ‘I give unto you a sign ... that I shall gather in, from their long dispersion, my people, O house of Israel, and shall establish again among them my Zion’ (3 Ne. 21:1) The coming forth of the Book of Mormon is a sign to the entire world that the Lord has commenced to gather Israel and fulfill covenants He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We not only teach this doctrine, but we participate in it. We do so as we help to gather the elect of the Lord on both sides of the veil” (“The Gathering of Scattered Israel” October 2006 Conference).

President Nelson asserts that the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is the sign that the gathering of Israel has commenced. With this in mind, It is interesting to note the events leading up to the First Vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, as well as the subsequent events that occurred since its
publication. As we review some of these historical events, it becomes clear that the Lord, indeed, was performing a “marvelous work and a wonder” in order to bring about His purposes to redeem His people (see Isa. 29:14).

**1805-1820** Joseph Smith was greatly influenced by the “Second Great Awakening,” which was occurring in America between 1790-1850, with the peak of the Movement being 1820-1840. Joseph T. Antley explained that “Joseph Smith grew up during the Second Great Awakening, a period of tremendous religious excitement that spurred frequent revivals (Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 415-28). The area of western New York where the Smiths settled would later be referred to as the ‘Burned-over District’ because the region was so heavily evangelized that there was no ‘fuel’ (or unconverted people) left to ‘burn’ (or convert) (Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: The Social and Intellectual History of New York, 1800-1850*). Within the first six years of the Smiths’ move to New York, ‘revivals were reported in more towns and a greater number of settlers joined churches than in any previous period of New York history’ (Milton V. Backman Jr. “Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 302).

The family attended the occasional meeting but remained separate from organized religion during Joseph’s early childhood. Even so, the deeply religious atmosphere created by the revivals led many in the region, including the Smiths, to search for spiritual fulfillment (“The Cultural and Religious Environment of Joseph Smith’s Youth,” *BYU Religious Education 2010 Student Symposium*, 2010, 3-21).

The feelings raised by the revival camp meetings prompted Joseph’s visit to the Sacred Grove, where he knelt in prayer to ask the Lord which of the churches he should join. The Lord told Joseph that he “must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and ... that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof’ (JS-H 1:18-19). Just as the angel had shown to Nephi centuries earlier, “the plain and most precious” teachings had been lost, “and also many covenants of the Lord” had been “taken away” (see 1 Ne. 13:26).

Some three years later, in **September 1823**, Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith, and told him that “God had a work for [him] to do” (JS-H 1:33). That work would include the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon from the Hill Cumorah on **September 22, 1827**. On that same date, religious Jews would have been keeping the Feast of Trumpets, or Rosh Hashanah, which symbolized 1) the beginning of Israel’s final harvest, 2) the day God had set to remember His ancient promises to regather Israel, 3) a time for new revelation that would lead to a new covenant with Israel, and 4) a time to prepare for the Millennium (see Lynet Hadley Read, “The Golden Plates and the Feast of Trumpets” *Ensign*, January 2000).

On **May 15, 1829**, the Aaronic Priesthood was restored, and sometime between **June 1829-April 1830**, the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored.

The translation of the Book of Mormon was finished in **June 1829**, and the first copies of the Book of Mormon were published on **March 26, 1830**.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized on **April 6, 1830**.

**October 1830** Far away in distant Israel, a group of rabbis who had gathered to Jerusalem came together to draft a letter they felt was necessary to their salvation. They knew nothing of Joseph Smith, or of the
great events taking place in America. The letter was titled “Epistle to the Ten Tribes,” and began its circulation six months after the formation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Rabbi Israel ben Shmuel Ashkenazi of Shklov (1770-1839) was the main author of the letter to the lost Ten Tribes. He believed that a reunion between the lost Ten Tribes of Israel and the children of Judah was necessary before the Messiah would come and redeem His people. He had heard a rumor that someone had met a man who purported to be from the tribe of Dan in Yemen. This greatly excited Rabbi Israel and many of his fellow scholars, who worked together in creating a formal plea for the Ten Tribes to “come home.”

The Zohar states: “For during the time of the Footsteps of the Messiah, some of our brethren of the Ten Tribes will be discovered” (M. Eliav, Jewish Settlement in the Land of Israel Though the Perspective of German Politics, p. 4).

Rabbi Israel believed that the Ten Tribes held certain keys to the redemption and restoration of Judah, the holy lands and the temple. He wrote that there would be a certain order that would occur in that redemption, and felt that anything taken out of order would corrupt the whole process. In other words, in his mind, Jerusalem would not be rebuilt until after the gathering and unification of the tribes began, and proper judges, counselors, or those who were “ordained” by authority were called to lead them. He believed that the proper order would occur thusly:

- Ingathering of exiles
- Restoration of justice (or judges)
- Extirpation of apostates
- Reward for the righteous
- Rebuilding Jerusalem
- Messiah son of David to come
- Prayer of united Israel
- Renewal of Temple service

Most interesting to the LDS scholar, would be Rabbi Israel’s reliance on a teaching by Maimonides that the “renewal of ordination was a necessary precondition to the Messiah’s advent,” and that this ordination would “establish an authorized court of ordained sages” or judges. Maimonides wrote: “And this [renewal of ordination] will no doubt be when the Creator, may He be blessed, prepares the hearts of men and increases their merit and their desire for God, may He be blessed, and for the Torah, and augments their wisdom before the coming of the Messiah” (Sha’arei Zedeq le-Zera Yizhaq, p. 14a, as quoted by Arie Morgenstern, Hastening Redemption: Messianism and the Resettlement of the Land of Israel, pp. 100-101).

Is it a coincidence that the Jerusalem rabbis were looking for a group of men who properly held the priesthood — in the very year that the Melchizedek priesthood was restored?

Maimonides taught that as the Jews did not have this proper ordination, the Ten Tribes must have a leader amongst them who possessed the ordination, or authority, and could thereby ordain others to sit in the councils of judges (Sha’arei Zedeq le-Zera Yizhaq, p. 40a). Arie Morgenstern explains that “this was the first time in the history of Jewish messianism that there was an effort to assign the Ten Tribes a central role in the redemptive process through renewal of ordination. The Ten Tribes had always been taken into account, particularly during times of messianic awakening, but only insofar as it was believed that they would be discovered at the end of days and might bring their military prowess to bear against
the enemies of the Jews. Never before had they been seen as those who would renew ordination”
*Hastening Redemption: Messianism and the Resettlement of the Land of Israel*, p. 102).

On **October 18, 1830**, Rabbi Israel signed his name to this extraordinary epistle. “The letter was given to Barukh ben Samuel of Pinsk, who was being dispatched to locate the Ten Tribes” (*Hastening Redemption: Messianism and the Resettlement of the Land of Israel*, p. 103; see also [http://www.jewishhistory.org.il/history.php?startyear=1830&endyear=1839]).

Excerpts from the Letter to the Ten Tribes follows:

> “Thus send the dwellers of the land of Israel, who abide by the Torah of Moses, [which is] a gift and inherited portion, to our brothers — the children of Israel, the son of Isaac the son of Abraham who revealed the belief in Hashem (the Lord) — they are our holy and pure brothers, the righteous upon whom the world rests — the sons of Moses, servant of Hashem (the Lord) — who dwell across the river ... and who pledge allegiance to the king — the King of Israel — who sits upon a mighty throne and who rules over the Ten Tribes, whose settlement is in the land of beyond the rivers ... who camp according to their banners, the tribe of Dan, of Naphtali, of Gad, and Asher, the tribe of Issachar who understand the movements of the celestial bodies — constantly involved in Torah study — and the tribe of Zebulun ... the tribe of Reuben, of Ephraim and Manasseh, and the tribe of Simeon, may Hashem (the Lord) be with them ... and their King ... and to our honored brothers, the children of Israel ...

> “Accept abundant greetings from your brethren, the children of Israel, the last remnant of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, dispersed among the four corners of the earth; and from your brethren in the Land of Israel from the diaspora of the land of Ashkenaz, who out of their burning desire for the holy land — the land adored by the higher and lower; land of Israel holiest of lands, put their lives on the line and have traversed seas and deserts until reaching our holy city Jerusalem, and the burial place of our fathers, that is Hebron, and to the holy city ... attaching themselves to the plot of Hashem and rolling in its dust, who sit in the tents of the houses of study of Torah and divine worship, they all send regards as abundant as the dew and the mist, to endeared brothers and friends, champions of Torah and mitzvoth (commandments/covenants). Our hearts yearn, our hearts thirst, our hearts desire to see their faces, to kiss the dust of their feet, and to witness the grand countenance of our master the king pure and holy, and to hear of their wellbeing and their encampment, and may their eyes witness as ours when Hashem returns to Zion, and the prophecy of Isaiah the prophet becomes fulfilled ‘saying: to the imprisoned — go free; those in darkness — to the light’ ...

> “Thus said your brothers: ‘how pleasant are your tents, O Jacob’ — as we have heard from afar that Hashem has chosen them and protected them and has allowed them to retain the ruler’s staff and they remain [politically] independent, and have a king who rules them, and don’t suffer from the nations of the world ...

> “At the mention of this my innards rejoice and my heart is gladdened, as we have merited to witness the fruition of the scripture, ‘Israel nor Judah are widowed from their God,’ and our spirits are strengthened vis a vis foreigners who say, as we have been led as sheep to slaughter to be decimated: there is no hope nor salvation, and ‘where is your God let him come and save you,’ and we are disgraced; and all cities are built and standing, yet the city of God is downtrodden and in ruins, and each nation has political independence with a king to rule it, and this nation of Hashem is left to be trodden upon and pillaged, to the point where we have declared that we can no longer ... Yet the staff of their majesty and might and their vast bountiful lands and their wealth and success in war, how pleasant is the voice of the messenger
over the hills who brings us these tidings, as we will have witnessed with our very own eyes Hashem’s salvation of Zion and he shall choose Jerusalem once more as redeemers shall ascend mount Zion.

“Nevertheless, as our lands of settlement are far away and traveling difficult, ‘Israel is a sheep far flung,’ And Israel has dwindled and been subjugated to their enemies — in body, mind and possessions, and our enemies have placed harsh decrees upon us, it hasn’t been possible for us to contemplate sending emissaries to our brethren, our allies ... 

“As we have relied on the words of our sages, ‘do not discredit anything,’ and as our holy teacher Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai revealed to us in his Zohar, in the days preceding the coming of Messiah some of our brethren of the Ten Tribes will be discovered, and likewise our Rabbis have a tradition regarding the script stated by King David, ‘Gilead is mine, Manasseh is mine, the Holy One blessed be he said ... therefore when the holy one blessed be he gathers Israel, he does so first with the tribe of Manasseh ... Therefore we have found the strength, we the Ashkenazi community in the land of Israel, and are dispatching to you an upright and wise emissary Rabbi Baruch ben Shmuel from the holy city of Tzfat, who is willing to endanger himself and cross seas and deserts until the Merciful One shall bring him before your great throne.

“And all Jews in all Diasporas maintain faith in our God, and wherever they be they are busy in Torah study, but upon them and upon us the yoke of exile has been too heavy. There is no space to describe fully what we have gone through since our temple was destroyed, these past 1763 years; many catastrophes have befallen us, too great in number to describe; and in the year 1648 gentiles murdered of our Jewish brethren more than 200,000 souls in various methods of death, and filled up many pits with men, women, and children who all sanctified his blessed name and surrendered themselves to death and bared their necks to slaughter; this is besides all the sufferings befalling every generation in each country, and all the curses have been manifested through us, but nevertheless, we’ve never forgotten his great name.

“In light of the above, we request three things from his majesty Our Master the King of Israel, and from our most holy brethren the sons of Moses and from all our brothers, the Ten Tribes.

“First, we plead with you on behalf of the entire congregation of Israel, whose dignity has been trampled upon, and his holy name which has become deserted, as we are asked ‘where is your God?’ our energy are depleted and our minds clouded and have not the strength to pray effectively before our creator as the scripture says ... and now, in the later generations, as the tribulations are more frequent and sustenance is hard to come across ... we thereby beseech our master, help us! Oh help us! You are our brothers, we are the sons of one man, aid us, aid us in prayer! ...

“Second, what our hearts desire, this thing: it is well known from our rabbis the before the Messiah comes there must be in the land of Israel a court comprised of those ordained in classical [ordination], yet through our sins and through the harsh decrees of the multiple exiles the ordination has disappeared, and the law is that only an ordained can ordain, and Hashem promised that there will be a high court as it says, ‘I will restore your judges as it was in the past ... afterwards you’ll be known as the city of justice, a center of truth; Zion shall be redeemed through justice and its returnees through charity.’ And this will happen without a doubt once The Creator helps people become attracted to the Torah before the coming of Messiah, and as we have heard the you have a Sanhedrin — ordained from ordained, as you adjudicate capital cases, please select some of your ordained wise men to come to Israel to ordain scholars so that we’ll have in Israel a court comprised of ordained, because the beginning of the redemption hinges on this, and how appropriate would it be for great personages as they are to come to
Israel . . . Furthermore, we have a tradition from the sages of the Talmud that the temple will be rebuilt before the dynasty of David will be restored, and Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai also revealed to us that Hashem first rebuilds Jerusalem and then gathers in the exiles, and when your scholars arrive here and we will get a glimpse of their holy faces, the downtrodden souls of oppressed will be returned to life, joy shall be restored, strength given, the crooked will become straight ... and the laws of God will become clear and their holy words will amplify the love of The Creator and inspire people to unite and learn Torah and serve Hasehm and a redeemer shall come to Zion.

“Third we ask of you, as our brethren in the Diaspora assist Jews in Israel ... with the financial burden ... we therefore ask that donations should be collected from the generous of heart for our salvation ...”

“And fourth, something that will surely make us very happy, we ask of you to send us written communication in the holy Hebrew tongue, answering our inquiries and putting to rest our uncertainties, describing their lands, their status, their numbers, and their Torah knowledge, so that all the righteous residents of our Diasporas — who are oppressed in body and mind and now suffer and toil under harsh conditions — would have something to rejoice about ...

“And we, brothers from afar prostrate ourselves in front of his majesty our master, the king of Israel, and beg him to acquiesce to our requests and in the meantime we in the holy land raise our hands to heaven in prayer at the holy places ... Our eyes are towards heaven, may the above be good advocates for us before The Creator, may He once more have mercy on us and grant all of us freedom and rebuild His temple. Amen” (“Vilna Gaon’s Students Letter to the Lost Tribes," sefaria.org).

These faithful Jewish leaders, who longed for the priesthood and for the ordained leaders amongst the ten tribes to come and lead them to the Messiah, believed their mission had failed, when after four years of visiting every people he thought might have the keys he sought, Rabbi Barukh’s mission ended with his murder in 1834.

But the Lord has promised: “Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out” (Ezek. 34:11), and so, surely the eye of the Good Shepherd was upon Rabbi Israel and Rabbi Barukh and was reaching out to Joseph Smith, an Ephraimite, even at the same time that He was instilling the desire within the Rabbis to find their lost brethren, and the restoration of all the covenant blessings.

At the dedication of the Kirtland Temple on March 27, 1836, Joseph Smith prayed: “But thou knowest that thou hast a great love for the children of Jacob (Israel), who have been scattered upon the mountains for a long time, in a cloudy and dark day. We therefore ask thee to have mercy upon the children of Jacob, that Jerusalem, from this hour may begin to be redeemed; And the yoke of bondage may begin to be broken off from the house of David; And the children of Judah may begin to return to the lands which thou didst give to Abrahm, their father ...” (see D&C 109:60-67).

Joseph’s prayer was in keeping with the Lord’s will. Speaking of the latter-day, the Savior told the Nephites: “Then shall this covenant which the Father hath covenanted with his people be fulfilled; and then shall Jerusalem be inhabited again with my people, and it shall be the land of their inheritance” (3 Ne. 20:46).

On April 3, 1836, Moses appeared in the Kirtland Temple and delivered to the Prophet Joseph “the keys of the gathering of Israel from the four parts of the earth” (D&C 110:11). This was yet another holy day for faithful Jews, who were keeping Passover, and yearning for Elijah’s return, thus ushering in the time of the Messiah. At that time, Elijah also appeared at the Kirtland Temple to restore the sealing keys to
the earth. Never had a prophecy had more urgent meaning than did Malachi’s on that fateful Passover: “Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.” (Mal. 4:5-6; see also D&C 110:13-16) Moroni adjusted the verses to read: “And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers” (D&C 2:2).

The children were turning to the fathers, and learning of the promises that had been made to them — the promises of covenant with the Lord Jehovah that were even then being fulfilled.

Ten years after Rabbi Israel sent his letter off to the Ten Tribes, Joseph Smith wrote a letter (1840) wherein he noted that the Jews “have been scattered among the Gentiles for a long period; and in our estimation, the time of the commencement of their return to the Holy Land has already arrived.” At the April 1840 Conference, Joseph Smith commissioned Apostle Orson Hyde to go to Palestine and there dedicate the land for the return of the Jewish people (History of the Church, 4:112-13).

Joseph Smith wrote to Orson Hyde and his companion, John Page (who did not continue on the mission): Dear Brethren: I am happy in being informed by your letter that your mission swells "larger and larger." It is a great and important mission, and one that is worthy those intelligences who surround the throne of Jehovah to be engaged in. Although it appears great at present, yet you have but just begun to realize the greatness, the extent and glory of the same. If there is anything calculated to interest the mind of the Saints, to awaken in them the finest sensibilities, and arouse them to enterprise and exertion, surely it is the great and precious promises made by our heavenly Father to the children of Abraham; and those engaged in seeking the outcasts of Israel, and the dispersed of Judah, cannot fail to enjoy the Spirit of the Lord and have the choicest blessings of heaven rest upon them in copious effusions (Letter to Orson Hyde and John E. Page, May 14, 1840).

In fulfillment of that assignment, on October 24, 1841, Orson Hyde stood upon the Mount of Olives and dedicated the land of Palestine for the return of the Jews and of the tribes of Israel. The dedicatory prayer included the following: “Now, O Lord! Thy servant has been obedient to the heavenly vision which Thou gavest him in his native land; and under the shadow of Thine outstretched arm, he has safely arrived in this place to dedicate and consecrate this land unto Thee, for the gathering together of Judah’s scattered remnants, according to the predictions of the holy Prophets—for the building up of Jerusalem again after it has been trodden down by the Gentiles so long, and for rearing a Temple in honor of Thy name.”

The prayer continued: “O Thou, Who didst covenant with Abraham, Thy friend, and Who didst renew that covenant with Isaac, and confirm the same with Jacob with an oath, that Thou wouldst not only give them this land for an everlasting inheritance, but that Thou wouldst also remember their seed forever. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have long since closed their eyes in death, and made the grave their mansion. Their children are scattered and dispersed abroad among the nations of the Gentiles like sheep that have no shepherd, and are still looking forward for the fulfillment of those promises which Thou didst make concerning them . . .

“Let the land become abundantly fruitful when possessed by its rightful heirs; let it again flow with plenty to feed the returning prodigals … Incline them to gather in upon this land according to Thy word. Let them come like clouds and doves to their windows. Let the large ships of the nations bring them from the distant isles; and let kings become their nursing fathers, and queens with motherly fondness wipe the tear of sorrow from their eye . . .

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“Let them know that it is Thy good pleasure to restore the kingdom unto Israel — raise up Jerusalem as its capital, and constitute her people a distinct nation and government, with David Thy servant, even a descendant from the loins of ancient David to be their king” (History of the Church 4:456-59).

Miraculously, although the Jewish people had been dispersed for nearly 2,000 years, within a century of Joseph’s prayer at the Kirtland Temple, and Orson Hyde’s prayer on the Holy Mount, the State of Israel was formed in 1948.

In perfect accordance with the revelation that Rabbi Israel had received, Joseph Smith said of the tribe of Judah and the city of Jerusalem: “Judah must return, Jerusalem must be rebuilt, and the temple, and water come out from under the temple, and the waters of the Dead Sea be healed. It will take some time to rebuild the walls of the city and the temple, etc., and all this must be done before the Son of Man will make His appearance” (Teachings, 286).

In this dispensation, the preaching order has been reversed: the gospel goes “from the Gentiles unto the house of Israel” (D&C 14:10). We now know ourselves as “covenant Israel,” God’s “elect” (D&C 84:33-39). Can we learn from the past? Have we become exclusionary in any respect? Is pride present in our demeanor? Do we feel a false sense of security in the knowledge that we are chosen? Do we know what we have been chosen to do? Have we remembered the commandment to take the gospel to all the earth? Have we remembered the Jews and Israel?

President Ezra T. Benson said in his address “A Message to Judah from Joseph” “Of far greater value than the physical sustenance that Joseph of old provided his brethren is the sustenance that modern Joseph has to offer modern Judah today. We offer freely bread to eat and water to drink. I repeat, our interest in Judah is one of kinship, for we are your brothers. We come with a message and say, ‘We have ‘living water’ from its true source and well, which, if a man will drink it, ‘shall be in him a well of living water, springing up unto everlasting life’” (D&C 63:23).

President Benson continued: “In Jacob’s blessing to Judah, he declared: ‘Judah is ... as an old lion; who shall rouse him up?’ (Gen. 49:9; italics added). We come as messengers bearing the legitimate authority to arouse Judah to her promises. We do not ask Judah to forsake her heritage. We are not asking her to leave father, mother, or family. We bring a message that Judah does not possess. That message constitutes ‘living water’ from the Fountain of living water” (“A Message to Judah from Joseph” Ensign, December 1976).

As the Gentiles Nephi saw in his vision, how are we helping to fulfill the promises of the Lord? Are we willing, as Nephi was, to do anything that the Lord commands us to do in that work? Have we gone often, as Nephi did, to the Lord to ask Him what He would have us do, and how we can do it? How can we be better “nursing fathers and mothers” in nourishing others in the gospel?

Nephi testified: “By small means the Lord can bring about great things” (1 Ne. 16:29). This principle is exemplified in the small family “branch” broken from the tree of Israel, called Nephites and Lamanites. Not lost, or “cast off,” the records of these people are a means by which many are coming to the restored truths of covenant Israel.

“Wherefore, I speak unto all the house of Israel, if it so be that they should obtain these things,” Nephi declares (1 Ne. 19:19). His testimony still stands: “And thus we see that the commandments of God must be fulfilled. And if it so be that the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth
nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them ...” (1 Ne. 17:3).

May we look to the “blessings of the fathers” and the “promises made to the fathers” as we consider our own place within our Father’s great plan. As Mormon declared in his last writings: “Know ye that ye are of the House of Israel,” and as the Title Page of the Book of Mormon states, let us come to know through the Book of Mormon “what great things the Lord hath done for (our) fathers,” and embrace the covenants that they also cherished.