

Understanding What Is Jewish

by
Michael Rudolph

In a way, this article begins in the middle of the subject because it assumes the reader has already decided that Jewish traditions, in some form, and to some degree, have a place in his or her life. Because many Messianic believers do not venture into and participate in the wider Jewish world, their knowledge and only example of what is Jewish often comes from their experience within their own congregations. A common mistake that is made as a result, is believing that a certain practice they have observed in others is one that is prevalent within Judaism broadly, whereas the truth may be that only a certain component of the Jewish community practices it or even knows of it. This may be the case regardless of whether the observed practice is promulgated by the congregation's leadership, or merely adopted by some of its established members. The way to know *what-is-what* is through involvement in the Jewish community, education, and asking questions.

Permit me to highlight a Jewish practice that can cause some embarrassment if it is misapplied; it is the growing trend of Ohev worshippers wearing white on *Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*. It is a tradition that is practiced in Orthodox Judaism but, even there, not uniformly. What is more uniform throughout all forms of Judaism is that the leaders of a service – principally the rabbi and the cantor – wear white robes, white head coverings, and white *talitot*. Except in Orthodox circles, it is highly unusual for women to wear predominantly white clothing to services, so if a small group of our all-white-wearing women decide to visit a Conservative or Reform synagogue during one of the High Holy Days, instead of blending in, they would stand out. Please understand that I am not criticizing our women wearing white or our men wearing the white *kittle* and, in fact, I like it because it reminds me of our New Covenant priestly station and of our sins being washed clean (Isaiah 1:18) in Yeshua, our unblemished lamb. Still, anyone who wears predominantly white clothing on the High Holy Days should know that it is not a practice that is uniform throughout Judaism.

As a second example, there is an “official” Ohev tradition that appears to be Jewish, but is absolutely prohibited in Orthodox and in some Conservative synagogues. It is our tradition of blowing the *shofar* on Sabbaths that are closest to the new moon. The majority Jewish practice is that the *shofar* is never blown on *Shabbat*, and not even on *Rosh HaShanah* when it falls on a weekly Sabbath. Most Messianic Jewish congregations do not hesitate to blow the *shofar* on *Rosh HaShanah* when it falls on the Sabbath, but I believe Ohev is unique in our practice of sounding the *shofar* on the *Shabbat* closest to the new moon. Nevertheless, we are entitled to have our local customs even if they are unusual, so enjoy the *shofar* at Ohev, but do not think to bless a non-Messianic synagogue by carrying your *shofar* there on *Shabbat*.

I could continue with other examples where we depart from uniform Jewish practice such as non-Jews wearing the *talit*, offering *B'nei Mitzvah* to Gentile members, and our practice of standing during the *Sh'ma* (the Orthodox custom is to remain seated). But completeness is not the object of this article. The lesson intended is that we ought to educate ourselves in Jewish cultural matters and not make assumptions about Jewish universality from what we see others do. It is especially important that we be proactive in getting the message across to newcomers

that they ought not to copy practices they see without understanding them and being in accord.
As always, I am available to meet with anyone who has questions about Ohev's Jewish practices.

October 2010