

Communicating Friendship to Jewish People

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This message is about communicating friendship to the Jewish People for friendship's sake – not about having an agenda of evangelizing them. The Bible has many positive things to say about friendship and even God called two men His friends:

Exodus 33:11: *“So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”*

James 2:23: *“And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’ And he was called the friend of God.”*

While both Moses and Abraham were friends to God, most Jews today are not friends to Yeshua, so why ought we seek to be friends to them? Let's consider these Scriptures:

Job 6:14: *“To him who is afflicted, kindness should be shown by his friend, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty.”*

Leviticus 19:18: (which is the basis of Yeshua's teaching): *“You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”*

John 15:13: *“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.”*

Romans 11:28: (where Paul is speaking to Gentiles when he says of the Jews): *“Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers.”*

According to Scripture, we are to love even those whom we consider our enemies:

Matthew 5:43-44: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,”*

If we do those things for Jewish people – love them, do good to them, and pray for them without regard for how we are treated in return, we are acting toward them as friends.

Before I leave this particular point, I want to deal with a Scripture that is often misapplied as it relates to Jewish people, and is the cause of some not being willing to have a normal friendship with them:

2 Corinthians 6:14-15: *“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Messiah with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?”*

To begin with, Jews are no different than any other people in that they can choose to believe in God or not, or to believe in Yeshua or not, and in either case, to conduct their lives in either godly or ungodly ways. The way that the above Scripture is often misapplied to Jews is to assume that the term “unbeliever” only means “unbeliever in Yeshua,” and that the comparison of “light with darkness” equates belief in Yeshua with “light,” and unbelief in Yeshua with “darkness.” I do not believe that that is the Scripture’s intent.

Let’s first compare “righteousness with lawlessness,” terms that are also in the Scripture. Could the Scripture possibly be saying that a Jew who believes in Yeshua is counted as righteous, while a *Torah*-observant Jew who does not believe in Yeshua yet believes in God and seeks to fulfill all of God’s commandments in the best way he knows is lawless? How can a person be lawless whose entire approach to God is attempting to fulfill God’s Law?

Now let’s look at the third comparison – “Messiah with Belial.” Who is this “Belial?” He is a demon referenced in the apocryphal Book of Jubilees, where uncircumcised heathens are called “sons of Belial.” He also appears in the Latin Vulgate and in the King James version of the Bible as symbolizing the personification of evil.

So now the meaning of 2 Corinthians 6: 14-15 should be clear. It is not comparing Jews who believe in Yeshua with those who don’t. It is contrasting the light of those who believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with the darkness of heathens and doers of evil. It is for this reason that I do not refer to *Torah*-observant Jews in the rabbinical community as “unbelievers.” I may say that they are unbelievers in Yeshua, but I never just call them unbelievers.

PAGE 2: UNDERSTANDING OUR OWN IDENTITIES

Before we attempt to befriend a Jewish person or anyone else for that matter, we ought to understand and be at peace with our own identities.

Some of us are Jews, carriers of the Abrahamic Covenant, and therefore brethren with all other Jews on account of that covenant. Although we are at odds with many of our Jewish brothers regarding the identity of Yeshua, we are nevertheless family, and our family attitude toward one another ought to come through. Some of us are Gentiles and, although we have joined our lives with Jews, worship as Jews, and are members of a Messianic Jewish community, we nevertheless are not genetic carriers of the Abrahamic Covenant. Yet, as grafted-in Gentile believers in Yeshua, we are beneficiaries and participants in the Covenant, and we have become equal members in what Ephesians 2:12 refers to as the Commonwealth of Israel. So, we may not be “family-in-the faith” with all Jews, but we are certainly fellow citizens with them.

The reason it is important to take stock of and be at peace with our respective identities is that our identities as Messianics are likely to surface while attempting to be friends with Jews. For example, if we are Jews, we will almost certainly be asked why we have abandoned the beliefs of our fathers. And if we are Gentiles, we may have to convey assurance that we won’t turn against and persecute Jews in the future as we have in the past.

PAGE 3: UNDERSTANDING JEWISH PEOPLE

There is much to understand about Jewish people, and our time is much too short to address the subject completely. I will, however, try to hit some important points.

A first thing to understand is that there is no universal characteristic of a Jewish person. Jews come in all colors, all languages, all personalities, all cultures, all citizenships, and all beliefs. Not far from the truth is the story of the Chinese Jew who greets the Ashkenaz Jew from New York by saying: “Funny, you don’t look Jewish!” Being a Jew is defined biblically by nothing more than our genetic lineage and circumcision (Genesis 17:4, 6-7, 19-21; 26:1-4; 28:10-14; 35:9-12; 48:3-4; 50:24-25); although God desires much more from the Jewish people than that, it is He who determined who was to be considered a Jew.

It is also important to distinguish between who is a Jew and what is “Jewish.” Although God never defined “Jewish,” it is what many Jews base their identity on, and so it cannot be disregarded by those of us who want to understand and befriend Jews. A Jew does not normally recognize another Jew by his genotype or circumcision; he recognizes him by his history and his culture. Where did he come from? Does he claim to be a Jew? Did his parents claim to be Jews? Does he attend a synagogue? Does he pray the siddur? Has he a connection to Israel or to the Holocaust? Does he speak or understand Yiddish? Hebrew? Ladino? Is He Torah-observant to any degree? Does he keep the Feasts? Keep the Sabbath? Keep kosher? Does he resonate with Jewish humor? Recognize Jewish foods? Is he Ashkenaz or Sephardic? Does he affiliate with one of the branches of Judaism?

Despite our considerable diversity and at the risk of generalizing, I admit that we Jews are known for having a few characteristics in common. We argue a lot – particularly with other Jews. We hate being missionized by Christians. We value family, education, intellect, and professional achievement. We fear assimilation, and we value being Jewish even if we don’t fully understand what that means.

Curiously, not all Jews are secure in their sense of Jewish identity; I suspect that this is partly a legacy of the holocaust and our history of the Goyim telling us that we are inferior, heretical, evil, and “Christ-killers.” But it also comes from strife within our communities, where groups of Jews routinely discriminate against and reject other Jews. In Israel, there is enmity toward Orthodox Jews for certain reasons, toward Messianic Jews for other reasons, toward Chassidim for still other reasons, and toward Ethiopian Jews for every reason. Then, of course there is payback by the Orthodox who have significant political control over *aliyah*, and do not recognize marriages or conversions other than their own.

What this means in a practical sense is that the person who wants to have Jewish friends should look for and become familiar with his friends’ sensitivities and avoid stumbling into areas of unhealed hurts and insecurities.

PAGE 4: SELF-IMPOSED IMPEDIMENTS TO FRIENDSHIP

Gentiles in our Messianic congregations sometimes think that it is easier for the Jewish members to befriend Jews than it is for them. That is often not the case because Jews expect Gentiles to believe in Yeshua, while a Jew who believes in Yeshua is perceived as a threat and a traitor to

Judaism. Whether we are Jews or Gentiles, however, there are certain presuppositions and fears that we likely harbor that could cause us to draw back from pursuing friendship with Jews in the wider Jewish Community. I will mention some of the more common ones.

Fear of rejection is a “biggie” because we have heard that the Jewish Community is hostile both to Yeshua and to those of us who believe in Him. I am not going to guarantee that your overture of friendship to a Jewish person will not be rebuffed, but I can assure you that if you act in faith you will not be scarred by it and, if you persist, you will eventually find yourself with a circle of Jewish friends whom you will enjoy and who will enjoy you.

Another common presupposition is that the Jewish Community is closed to outsiders and, if you are either a Messianic Jew or a non-Jew, there is no way you will be able gain access. That is simply not true. There are always going to be some people, Jews included, whose main purpose in life seem to be to exclude others. You’ll run into them, but there are many more whose nature it is to warmly welcome newcomers – even those who are unlike themselves.

Let me share something that I observed, and what was told to me by an African-American Gentile member of a local Messianic Jewish congregation. One day she and I met at an Orthodox-owned Jewish Bookstore where I was known to be a Messianic Jew and was, nevertheless, always treated well. I noticed (it surprised me) that the store’s elderly Jewish owner appeared to know my friend. When we left the store, I inquired of her and she told me that several years earlier she had introduced herself as a believer in Yeshua to the store’s owner. Instead of being put off, the store’s owner asked her if she would like to experience an Orthodox Jewish service and, when she said “yes,” he invited her to visit his synagogue as his guest. She took him up on his offer and, when she arrived at the synagogue, she was greeted courteously by others in a way that she knew she was expected. After the service, she was introduced to the rabbi as being “a devout woman,” and the rabbi took time to explain things about the service in a most gracious way. That was one occasion. Another time when she visited the bookstore, the owner was just returning from his grandson’s *brit milah* and, when he saw her, he said: “Had I known how to contact you, I would have invited you to the *brit*.” I think these two examples make my point.

Another presupposition that inhibits some Gentiles from seeking Jewish friends is that they think that Jews know so much more about the Bible than they, and that they will discredit themselves in conversations that turn religious or theological. Sure, some in the Jewish Community are scholars, but relatively few. My personal experience is that most Messianic Jews and Gentiles with several years in the Faith have a much greater command of the Bible than the average synagogue-attending Jew, and almost certainly more than any secular Jew. Still, no one knows everything; that’s why we have each other from whom we can learn and receive advice if we find ourselves over our heads.

Another thing that can interfere with forming normal friendships is the temptation to preach the Gospel prematurely – to persons whom the Holy Spirit has not yet prepared. Unless the Holy Spirit directs otherwise, it is often best to just be a friend and trust God to handle the rest.

PAGE 5: HOW TO MEET JEWISH PEOPLE

There are two basic things to do if we want to meet Jewish people. The first is to pray for God to arrange a meeting. The second is to be where Jewish people are.

Many of us can meet Jewish people naturally through casual encounters at work, at school, at supermarket checkouts, and just about anywhere. If we have asked God to bring Jewish people across our paths, then we need to be expectant and alert for when it happens and not lose the moment. Also, we ought to have a plan thought out for who, how, and under what circumstances we will encourage a second meeting if God provides us with the first.

Places where Jewish people hang out are where WE should be hanging out, but how many of us do? We should all be checking at least one local Jewish newspaper regularly in order to find Jewish-sponsored activities of our liking that we can attend. I stress “of our liking” because we want to meet Jewish people who have common likes and interests. The local Jewish Community Center is a great place to meet Jewish people and, by the way, JCC memberships are not limited to Jews. Are we motivated to support Israel? There are many organizations dedicated to supporting Israel, and guess what? Most of their members are Jews. If we live in a neighborhood where there are Jewish people, joining the neighborhood watch or other civic organization will bring us into contact with potential Jewish friends. And don’t forget the local synagogue. I heard that there are occasionally some Jewish people there too. The point I am trying to make is that it is not hard to meet Jewish people if we are willing to get off of our couch and go to where Jewish people are.

PAGE 6: FRIENDSHIP IS WHAT WE MOST HAVE TO OFFER

Jewish people are no different than other people in their having needs that friends can sometimes help satisfy. Knowing about Yeshua and the good news is, of course, one of those needs, and we have to be alert for when the Holy Spirit tells us that the moment is right. But I have noticed another need that many Jewish people have; it is to be told that being Jewish is important, and why.

Hearing me say that may surprise you because the Scriptures clearly explain the importance of being Jewish. The problem is that most Jewish people are not educated in the Scriptures, and therefore their concept of Jewish identity is a combination of culture, nostalgia, and regret. Culture, because most of us have arrived at adulthood with memories and experiences that we have been told are culturally Jewish. Nostalgia, because many of those memories and experiences are sweet to us in that they remind us of our youth and of loved ones who may now be departed. Regret, because some of the memories are also painful, as some of us have lost family members to persecutions, have experienced personal rejections, and have been denied professional, economic, and social opportunities. Most of us who are Jews have been reminded that we are different from other people, and not necessarily in a complementary way. As a result, some of us are suspicious of non-Jews and fully expect the time when our neighbors will once again turn against us. Many Jews support Israel, not because it is the fulfillment of God’s promise, but because it is a place of refuge to where we can escape when the pogroms start up again. And yes, we are known for being philanthropic and empathetic, but much of our money and donated time is channeled back into the Jewish community because (our thinking is): “If we don’t care for our own, who will?”

Jewish people need to be made aware that the real value of being a Jew is being a servant of God and a preserver of *Torah*, not only for ourselves, but for the nations of the world. We need to be reminded that circumcision is more than just a custom – that it is a mark of the Covenant God made with Abraham, for his family through Isaac and Jacob, to become a priestly nation that is destined to bring the world knowledge of its Messiah. We need to be reminded to not turn inward but rather to turn outward, for to us has been given the privilege and responsibility of leading the nations in spreading the Word of God (including the *B'rit Chadasha* and the Good News of Yeshua) to the rest of the world. We need to embrace the biblical truth that to die to self for God is not defeat but rather great gain, and we especially need to embrace the *mitzvah* that we must forgive and love those who have harmed us.

An area in which Messianic Jews and Gentiles are uniquely equipped is providing information and advice to mixed marriage Jewish families. Many Jews in the wider Jewish community are married to Christians. Mixed marriages ought to be our specialty because, not only do we have experience with mixed marriages among ourselves, but we understand covenant and biblical history better than most and stand theologically in a place that reconciles Judaism with most of the beliefs of Christianity. We are a community that is ready and willing to receive mixed marriage families and to disciple them toward fulfilling their covenantal responsibilities to and through their children.

Finally, and probably most important, what we have to offer a Jewish friend is friendship itself. Jews are no different than other people. Some are lonely, some are needy, and some have interests they are burning to share with others. Being a friend is both give and take. The best way to be a friend to a Jewish person is to forget about being Jewish or Gentile, and seek to relate as simply one person to another.

PAGE 7: DO'S AND DON'TS OF JEWISH FRIENDSHIP

The most important part of developing Jewish friendships is to be genuine. We ought not talk down to, nor unduly raise up any friend merely because he or she is Jewish. As with most nationalities, events of history and human conflicts have produced fears and sensitivities among Jewish people of which we need to be aware. From antiquity, but especially since the middle ages, Jews have been called “Christ Killers,” been accused of causing the bubonic plague, were reputed to have ritually killed Christian children, been said to have seized control of the world’s economies, and on and on. In Spain and Portugal, many were killed for their Jewish beliefs, some exiled, and others forcibly converted to Catholicism. Even Nazi Germany cloaked itself with the trappings of Christianity through its use of iron crosses, twisted crosses, and the complicity of several mainline Christian denominations.

What definitely does not help a Jewish friendship is using the common evangelistic word “convert.” In the Bible, the word “convert” merely means to change our nature and embrace God. To most Jews, however, the term “convert” means to stop being a Jew and become a “Christian.” Words like this one are so deeply ingrained as negative, that in relating to Jewish friends, terminology becomes very important. On the American Jewish scene, “Christ,” “cross,” “baptize,” “church,” and “convert” are not favorable terms because Jews associate them with being “not Jewish,” and with those who have persecuted us. That is why most Messianic Jewish

congregations ask their members to use other equivalent terms such as “Messiah,” “execution stake,” “immerse,” “congregation,” and “receive Yeshua.” That is also why we do not display the cross or wear it as jewelry. It is also why Messianic Jews do not refer to themselves as Christians. Please take this seriously. It is egregious to the Jewish ear to hear a member of a Messianic Jewish congregation say he is “going to church” when he means his congregation or synagogue.

There are several other “Don’ts” I can mention, but let me remind you of just one that I mentioned earlier. DON’T refer to a Jew who believes in God but does not yet believe in Yeshua as “unsaved” or as an “unbeliever.” If a Jewish person believes in God he is not an “unbeliever” – he or she is a “believer” in God, but possibly not in Yeshua. It is insulting and wrong to call a person who believes in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob an “unbeliever” without qualifying what we mean. As for calling such a person “unsaved,” that, in my opinion, is a judgment none of us is entitled to make, for only God can read hearts and minds. When we label a person “unsaved,” we are dealing them the ultimate judgment by inferring that they are not worthy of salvation. This expression, if it gets back to your Jewish friend, will likely result in his being your *former* Jewish friend.

Now for some “Do’s.” As a Messianic Jew or Gentile, DO keep a “Jewish” home. Keep some level of *kashrut* even if it is limited just to abstaining from pork and shellfish. Maintain a small Jewish library for your reading and reference; even one shelf will do. DO display Jewish artifacts, and DON’T display crosses and pictures of Jesus.

DO have Bible knowledge, and at least a conversational knowledge of contemporary Judaism. Know the basics of Jewish history and its intersection with Church history and be conversant with the most obvious and convincing of the Messianic prophecies (e.g. Isaiah 53 and Psalms 22).

DO know your way around the *siddur* – especially those prayers commonly used on the Sabbath – and know how to pray the prayers in Hebrew.

DO develop a vocabulary of Jewish terms – terms like *Tanakh*, *mashiach*, *Torah*, *mishpochah*, etc. This will help you in conversations with traditional Jewish people.

DO be prepared to explain why you believe in Yeshua, and to give an account of your life both before and after you came to faith.

DO be prepared to answer typical Jewish questions such as “How can a Jew believe in him and still call himself a Jew?” Also, be prepared to answer common objections such as “If he is *Mashiach*, why do we still have wars?”

DO show hospitality by inviting your friend to your home and DO accept invitations to his or hers. Plan to share meals and know how to conduct an *Erev Shabbat* table service.

DO look for common interests and non-religious activities to enjoy together. Normal friendships include sharing hobbies, activities, family celebrations, and so forth.

DO invite your Jewish friend to your *chavurah* or your congregation's Shabbat service once your identity as a Messianic Jew or Gentile is known. If your friend agrees to attend, describe the meeting to him in advance so he will be prepared for the experience.

Finally, and most important, DO pray for your friend and act toward him with confidence that he or she will eventually come to faith in Yeshua. Trust God for it, and believe *Rav* Sha'ul's prediction in Romans 11:26-27 that one day "*all Israel will be saved.*"