

# Conformity & Diversity in Messianic Jewish Congregations

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Delivered to Ohev Yisrael November 12, 2011

Marie and I are friends with a family that moved away from Washington D.C. and also from Messianic Judaism several years ago. After exploring several Christian options, they began to worship in a conservative Mennonite church.

There were several things that attracted my friends to the church, but several that eventually led to difficulty within their family. The husband liked the simple life practiced by the Mennonites, which included plainness of dress, biblical piety, and separation from things of the world – all positives, it would seem, until a congregant might object to one or another of the church's requirements (extended even to the privacy of one's home), and would find him or herself viewed as an outsider. That was what the wife experienced, to her dismay, when she was confronted with having to conform to strict community standards such as these:

- The color red could not be worn on any item of clothing.
- Cape dresses were expected to be worn by women in order to hide their female contours.
- Women were expected to keep their heads covered at all times.
- No jewelry was allowed to be worn.
- Men were required to be clean shaven.
- There could be no dancing of any kind.
- Service in the military and voting in national and local elections were not allowed.
- Watching movies was prohibited, as was having a television in one's home.
- Children were discouraged from asking their teachers to confirm, with Scripture, what was taught.
- Non-members (even longstanding visitors) were discouraged from dressing like Mennonites if they were not Mennonites.

Telling you about my friends' experience with the Mennonites is my way of introducing what I really want to talk to you about today, which are the lifestyle and standards of our own community here at Ohev Yisrael. Our standards and expectations are mostly different from those of the Conservative Mennonites yet, in a few ways, they are similar. We are similar, for example, in that we seek to derive our community's standards from our respective biblical understandings, but we are different in that Ohev includes among its standards, those derived from our Jewish identity and culture. An obvious way in which we are different is that Mennonites consider the Sabbath to be the first day of the week (Sunday), whereas we keep the seventh day Sabbath that was commanded to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. A way we are similar is that dressing modestly is a mutual goal, but we are different in that our way of dressing – especially for services – is more contemporary, and partially derived from Jewish custom and tradition. Our preference is that men cover their heads during prayer; we have no such expectation for women except when they read from the *bima*.

I'll mention two more – a way in which we are similar to the Mennonites, and another in which we are not. We are similar to them in that they do not want non-Mennonites to dress in Mennonite garb and, similarly, we prefer that non-committed Gentiles not wear the *tallit*, which is considered Jewish garb. Dissimilar, is that the Mennonites of the particular church I described consider it disrespectful for children to ask their teachers for supportive Scripture, whereas we encourage it, and our children's teachers are happy to comply.

We, being Messianic Jewish, have a challenge that most Christian churches do not have. A goal of every Mennonite church and most other Christian churches is to achieve homogeneity in their membership. They want members who are similar to one another in calling and lifestyle, and they hope that those who visit them will stay to become conforming members. Messianic Jewish congregations are quite different. Yes, our congregations do need a core of like-minded and similarly-called members in order to maintain our Jewish culture and Messianic Jewish vision. But the core membership of a Messianic Jewish congregation rarely (if ever) consists of only Jews. By God's design, almost all of our congregations consist of both Jews and specially committed Gentiles whom we at Ohev call *K'rovei Yisrael* – Gentiles who are so integrated into Jewish community and Jewish life, that they are virtually indistinguishable from their Jewish counterparts. We consider it a valuable biblical witness that God has brought together, in a single faith community, Jews and Gentiles joined by their common belief in Yeshua, the Messiah. Speaking to the Gentiles, Paul explains an aspect of this in Ephesians 2:13-15:

*But now in Messiah Yeshua you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Messiah. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, ,,,*

So, in a Messianic Jewish congregation, by God's design, even the core membership is heterogeneous because it consists of both Jews and Gentiles. What's more, the differences among members widens as one moves away from the core to the other participants who are not necessarily called to Messianic Judaism but have, nevertheless, come to Ohev for valid reasons. One common valid reason is a person becoming aware that the church he or she previously attended taught wrong theology about the *Torah*, the Land of Israel, the Sabbath, and the Jewish people, and he or she thirsts to be taught what is biblically true. Such a Gentile believer should be applauded and received by us, even though he or she may not ultimately be called to a Jewish life, or to have a Messianic Jewish vision. He or she may remain with us for a season, and then return to the Christian world to share what was learned while with us. Others may remain with us because there is no other suitable place for them to go, and a small number may be called by God to join Ohev's core membership as *K'rovei Yisrael*, and grow to become *chavurah* leaders, *shamashim*, and even elders. So, for us there is value in both homogeneity and heterogeneity – a core of members who are similar in being called to Ohev's Messianic Jewish life and vision, and others who may not be so called, but find being among us valuable and pleasurable.

Despite its value, the dissimilarity among Ohev congregants can sometimes generate confusion and problems that have to be addressed. I cannot mention them all within the time I have for this message, but here are a few that you will probably recognize:

- Members disagreeing over what ought to be Ohev's expression of Jewish life and practice vis-à-vis the surrounding Jewish community.
- Members disagreeing over the congregation's traditional role of women.
- Members criticizing members (and even non-members) for not living in accordance with what they deem authentic and proper Jewish observance.
- Members arguing over whether, and to what degree, there should be distinctions made in the congregation between Jews and Gentiles.
- Members disagreeing over how the Holy Spirit should manifest in our services.
- Gentiles being unsure of the role that God has for them within the Messianic Jewish Movement.
- Non-core members and even non-members attempting to influence the congregation in ways that are unauthorized by the leadership.
- Members debating over what things ought to be governed by the community, versus what ought to be left to the discretion of each member family.

Faith communities that are intentionally homogeneous in their membership and standards rarely encounter issues such as these, because visitors to those congregations readily perceive the rules, and those who don't want to conform simply don't stay. I mentioned previously that conservative Mennonite churches are among such communities, but so are Orthodox and Ultra-orthodox Jewish congregations. Messianic Jewish congregations are different, however, in that we are conscious of our Jewish calling to be a nation of priests, and that requires that we be diverse so we can minister to a diverse world; we read of this calling in Exodus 19:5-6, and of God's promise to Abraham that preceded it in Genesis 22:18 and Galatians 3:8 respectively:

Exodus 19:5-6

*"Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel."*

Genesis 22:18

*In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."* (See also, Galatians 3:8).

By the time the Covenant was given at Mt. Sinai, the Jewish community under Moses' leadership was already diverse, for we read in Deuteronomy 29:10-13:

*All of you stand today before the LORD your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives-- also the stranger who is in your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water—that you may enter into covenant with the LORD your God, and into His oath, which*

*the LORD your God makes with you today, that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*

Where did these strangers come from? They were among the mixed multitude who crossed the Red Sea in the exodus from Egypt.

Exodus 12:37-38

*Then the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed multitude went up with them also, and flocks and herds-- a great deal of livestock.*

Some of us who came from communities where a high level of conformity was required may experience difficulty adjusting to what sometimes appears to be laxness in Ohev's defining and enforcing its standards for our corporate events and the private lives of its members. Everywhere we look we see examples of non-conformity and inconsistencies like these:

- Some of us are unwilling to strike a match on the Sabbath, and others will light a gas stove in order to cook a meal.
- Some of us eat in restaurants on the Sabbath and even bring their own food to Tikkun and UMJC conferences. Others of us eat the food that is cooked and served to us there by the working hotel staff.
- Some of us comply with *Torah* by wearing fringes on our garments with strands of blue, while others of us do not wear fringes at all, and still others of us leave off the blue thread.
- Some of us cover our heads during prayer, and some of us do not.
- Some of us follow rabbinical *kashrut*, while some of us readily consume milk and meat in the same meal.
- The elders have declared their opposition to teen dating, yet some parents allow their teen children to date.

These are but a few of the non-conformities and inconsistencies we commonly encounter, that, if we are not careful, might cause us to become judgmental of our neighbor and think of him or her as being in sin, or not properly conforming to community norms. Such a reaction on our part might be acceptable in an Orthodox Jewish environment because the Orthodox consciously seek a high degree of community conformity. It is not, however, appropriate in most Messianic Jewish communities because of what I said earlier – that we accept heterogeneity in our midst for the sake of our hospitality and service to many kinds of people – many of whom are not Jewish – and, where they are Jewish, not all the same “flavor” of Jewish.

But there are also specific Scriptural reasons for our individuality, chief among which is that not all Gentiles are covenantally bound to apply the Commandments of *Torah* in exactly the same way as Jews do. The *K'rov Yisrael* Gentiles among us are (with few exceptions) bound in the same way as their Jewish brethren because they covenanted with God to live as Jews live and, to the extent possible, in community with Jews – in our case Messianic Jews. These are the

Gentiles who would have been standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai with Moses and the Israelites. These are the Gentiles who ought to be considered core members of Ohev along with the Jewish members.

Another Scriptural reason for there being diversity in the way Ohev congregants apply the Commandments of *Torah*, is that the Commandments were given thousands of years ago, when the *Shechinah* inhabited the Ark of the Tabernacle (and later the Temple), when the Levitical Priesthood was in full operation, and when the Government of Israel was, for the most part, responsive to God's direction. None of that is true today. But what is true today is that the Messiah has come, has sacrificed Himself for us, has been resurrected, and has sent us the Holy Spirit to direct us individually and corporately in how we should keep God's Commandments. That means that there are bound to be differences in how He leads each one of us, so when we see our brethren respond to the Commandments differently than we might, we ought not to automatically assume that they are going their own way instead of responding to the Holy Spirit's direction.

As for our corporate compliance, that is for the congregation's elders to discern, and one of the reasons that we are exhorted to obey and pray for our leaders:

Hebrews 13:17

*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.*

1 Timothy 2:1-2

*Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.*

In conclusion, don't expect many rules in a Messianic Jewish congregation, but do expect an emphasis on the Holy Spirit, and that congregations such as Ohev will adopt norms of Jewish expression and practice that everyone will be expected to conform to at services and other congregational functions. These are established by the elders and may be changed from time to time.

You can expect some inconsistency in these locally established norms because we mix and match traditions and practices drawn from the various expressions of Judaism and, sometimes, even from practices of the Church; the formality with which we take the Lord's Supper is an example of that. You can expect that there will not be any *kosher police* showing up at your door, but that members will be urged to keep their homes suitably Jewish so that Ohev members and guests – especially Jewish guests – can visit and feel the comfort of being in “Jewish space.”

You can expect that there will be diversity among Ohev members, and variations in their adherence to Jewish and other practices when in the privacy of their homes. You can depend on the elders to uphold standards of holiness among the members, but not be intrusive into matters of home life and bringing up children – things that ought to be left to each family’s discretion.

Ohev Yisrael is described in our *Shabbat* Bulletin with the words:

*“Providing a Congregational Home for Jewish Believers in Yeshua and for Believing Gentiles called to Serve Messiah within the Messianic Jewish Community.”*

This description recognizes that there are certain Gentiles who are specially called to the Messianic Jewish community to serve alongside their Jewish counterparts. As I indicated previously, we call these Gentiles *K’rovei Yisrael* to distinguish them from Gentiles who are here for legitimate reasons and may even be members, but are not specially called. The elders do not label who is who. If you are a *K’rov Yisrael* you know it, and if you are not you probably also know it. We expect God to reveal more the calling of *K’rov Yisrael* over time, so please pray for the elders to accurately hear God’s voice.

I imagine that this message will generate some questions, so feel free to contact me for a transcript, or to discuss anything you heard me say.

*B’shem* Yeshua,