

Christmas and the Messianic Jewish Congregation

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Delivered to Ohev Yisrael December 22, 2007

There is no getting around it – this is the Christmas season and, in the “US of A”, December 25 is Christmas.

People who know me as a Messianic Jewish leader sometimes ask me whether I celebrate Christmas and my answer is “Yes!” Now depending upon who asks me the question, they would either be happy with my answer or thoroughly dismayed if I just leave it at that. Christians who ask me, usually like my short answer “yes,” because it says to them that I am a Christian like they are, and what they hopefully mean by that is that I am a believer in Messiah Yeshua, which of course, I am. Jews from the wider Jewish community who ask me would not like my answer “yes” at all, because it tends to say to them that I have left Judaism, have become a Christian, and am now falsely calling myself a Jew. To avoid either of these misunderstandings, I don’t ever leave my answer at just “Yes”; I give more of an explanation.

Now Christians and Jewish unbelievers in Yeshua are not the only ones who ask me whether I celebrate Christmas. I am also asked occasionally by Jewish and Gentile Messianic believers who are exploring their own attitudes toward Christmas, or have written Christmas off as “not Jewish,” and are unsettled by discovering that some of their *mishpochah* in the congregation celebrate it.

Now of course, except for the *Magi*, the Scriptures are silent on celebrating Christmas, so everything I say about it needs to be taken as my opinion and nothing more. So if you’re ready, here goes.

At the beginning of the 20th Century’s re-emergence of Jewish belief in Yeshua, Jews who believed, found themselves beleaguered by angry families and an antagonistic Rabbinical Judaism that cried “traiter!” “You are no longer a Jew!” “You are a Christian!” And you know? In some ways they were right, because when Jews in the early movement began to come to faith, they did not start with Messianic Judaism and congregations anything like Ohev. They started by joining Christian Churches, putting on crosses, and calling themselves “Christians.”

Now most Jews did not know much about Christians or “Jesus” as they called him (and still do), but they knew this:

1. Jesus was the blue-eyed, fair-haired man-god of the Christians.
2. If you weren’t a Jew you were a Christian, and Christians had a record of persecuting Jews.
3. Christians ate stuff that Jews could not eat.
4. The way to tell a Christian from a Jew was to find out if he celebrated Christmas and Easter.

5. The way to know if he celebrated Christmas was to look to see if he had a tree in his living room, or hung colored lights on his house.

The next stage in the development of Messianic Judaism is what was called Hebrew Christianity. A number of Evangelical Christian churches found themselves with Jewish members that they didn't know what to do with because they still acted and talked like Jews. So they decided it would be good for the church to start a "Mission to the Jews" by allowing the Jewish members in their midst to conduct events on Jewish holidays, to start small groups with Jewish themes, and eventually to start congregations that had some Jewish rituals in them. These congregations came to be known as "Hebrew-Christian congregations," and the movement in which they found themselves became known as "Hebrew Christianity." Note the emphasis on "Christianity." A Jew who came to faith as part of this movement was considered a Hebrew-Christian and, in many cases, just a Christian. And because celebrating Christmas with trees and lights was so much a part of Christian culture, the Jewish Christian undoubtedly had them in his home. Although the Jew in a Hebrew-Christian congregation may have endured personal rejections and attacks because of his new-found faith, he was secure in his identity because he considered himself a Christian.

The next advance toward Messianic Judaism leads us to where we are now. Within Hebrew Christianity, the Jewish members of some of the congregations began to sense a lack of authenticity in what they were doing. Furthermore, some of the churches that had spawned them, dealt with them unwisely by imposing Christian culture, practices, and theologies on them that, by this time, they perceived to be foreign. These congregations, few at first, found each other and, one by one, seceded from their church affiliations and Christian denominations. They formed what became known as Messianic Jewish congregations, and the movement in which they affiliated was born and became known as Messianic Judaism. These new congregations were different from the Hebrew Christian ones in that they considered themselves "Jewish," and in order to emphasize their "Jewishness" and distinguish themselves from the Hebrew Christian congregations that remained, they incorporated an array of Rabbinic Jewish symbols and religious practices, and threw away every Christian symbol and practice they could, and that included Christian terminology, Christian music, Christian liturgy, the display of crosses, and most important, the celebration of Christmas and Easter that they felt would have continued to mark them as Hebrew-Christian rather than Messianic Jewish. It was a purge of all things visibly Christian except the Lord's Table and certain music which survived. Christmas trees, Christmas music, and Christmas lights did not survive.

It would seem that reordering things to be more Jewish would help the Jewish members of Messianic Jewish congregations to feel more secure in their Jewish identities. Unfortunately, the opposite was true. Before the change to Messianic Judaism, Christians understood that Hebrew-Christians were part of the universal Church and they embraced them. After the change, however, many Christians regarded the Messianic Jews as having left the Church and they mistrusted them, as the Messianic Jews seemed to have compromised their Christian faith and were returning to the synagogue. The remaining Hebrew-Christians didn't help either, as they held to their view that Jews who believed in Jesus should remain connected to, and loyal, to the Christian Church. The biggest rejection and opposition, however, came from the wider Jewish community. Before the change to Messianic Judaism, the worst that the Jewish establishment

could say about the Hebrew-Christians was that when they came to faith in Yeshua they stopped being Jews. After the change, however, attacks against the Messianic Jews from the Jewish community became fierce. Before, they were merely considered non-Jews; now they were non-Jews masquerading as Jews, with the explicit purpose of luring unsuspecting Jews away from the synagogue and converting them to Christianity through trickery. So the early Messianic Jews got it from all sides. Many of their families rejected them, the Christians either rejected them or mistrusted them, the remaining Hebrew-Christians did likewise, and the Majority Jewish establishment not only disenfranchised them as Jews, but accused them of being deceptive traitors, and a threat to normative Judaism. While there was a great sense of exhilaration in being in the forefront of a pioneer movement, there was also a great deal of confusion and uncertainty regarding their Jewish identity. The result was, that things Christian – particularly the celebration of Christmas in any form – was fiercely resisted. I can testify to these things from my own experience, because I came into modern Messianic Judaism in 1977.

So here we are in the year 2007 and, while some things have changed, some are still as they were. What has changed is that more Gentiles have joined the Messianic Jewish movement, and while we are still the subject of derision and discrimination by the wider Jewish community, Messianic Judaism has gotten a foothold in Israel, has found acceptance by much of the Church, and is more widely known and accepted overall. What has not changed is that some of us, both Jews and Gentiles, are still insecure in our identities, and are fearful of things Christian within our congregations. Some of the Jews among us see Christian things as posing a threat to our Jewish authenticity and to the purity of our “Jewish Space.” Some of the Gentiles among us have left Christianity in order to join Messianic Judaism, which they viewed as more biblical and therefore closer to “the true religion.” By both these groups, even remnants of Christianity in our midst are rejected as “un Jewish” (which they are), and dangerous to our Jewish identity (which they are only if we make them so). And of course, the decorations associated with Christmas are among the greatest offenders, so when this season comes, there are complaints and annoyances caused when members of Ohev discover that other members of Ohev choose to have Christmas trees, Christmas ornaments, and Christmas traditions in their homes.

So now that I have given you the background and laid out the problem, let me say some things about them, and give you the solution. I’ll take them out of order; here’s the solution first; it is Matthew 7:1&2 followed by James 5:9:

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."

"Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!"

The solution is that simple. Don’t judge your brother in regard to these things. Now permit me to tell you how I, as a Messianic Jewish leader, perceive Christmas.

First, we all know that Yeshua was not born on December 25. And we all know that the celebration of Christmas is neither commanded nor specifically mentioned in the Bible. And we all know – anyway, you will know once I tell you – that Christmas came about as part of

Christianity's attempt to distance itself from Judaism by creating a new calendar, and it was set on December 25 to coincide with the Romans' worship of Saturn. Also, Christmas trees have their origin in the Nordic feast of Yule, mistletoe was considered magical, decorations have nothing to do with Yeshua, Santa Claus is a fiction, and most people who set up trees and string lights around their houses don't believe in anything. Is that enough to discourage you from celebrating Christmas?

Well, it doesn't discourage me. Remember, at the beginning of this message I said that I am sometimes asked whether I celebrate Christmas and I answer "Yes!" Well I do, in that I read about and contemplate the importance of Yeshua's birth during this season, and tend to give messages about Christmas. I'm giving such a message now, and that is part of my celebration of Christmas this year. In the past I have also looked up old friends, volunteered in homeless shelters, also in soup kitchens, and have given charitably to Christian causes. During this season, I also like to listen to Christmas music – especially when it tells of Jesus and the holiness of His birth. People sometimes talk about the Christmas spirit; even if they mean spirit with a small "s," I feel it with a capital "S" during this season, and especially when I am around serious Christians such as Marie's and my Mennonite friends in Lancaster.

Let me now address the list of negatives I gave. We have to accept – it is a reality – that Christmas was hijacked by unbelievers and turned into a secular holiday. Okay, I say so what? I can enjoy Christmas for its holy significance and can enjoy secular things as well, so long as they are not sinful. Was it sinful to intentionally set the celebration of Christmas on December 25 in order to coincide with the heathen day of worship *Saturnelia*? I think it was sinful because, through it, the Christians' sought to deny their covenantal connection to their Jewish brethren in Yeshua, and also because it likely violated Deuteronomy 12:30-31 that commands:

"...Do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; ..."

But is it sinful for us to celebrate the birth of Yeshua on December 25 today? I say only if we are still trying to identify with the feast of *Saturnelia* and deny our Jewish connection. That doesn't apply to me and I am sure not to any of us.

Are Christmas trees, mistletoe and ornaments sinful? That depends on whether or not you believe that we can redeem sinful symbols for non-sinful purposes. I do. If you don't, then I guess you will discard all Christmas symbolism, but don't forget to also discard welcoming the Sabbath bride, lighting Sabbath lights with waving hands, singing *L'cha Dodi*, covering your eyes when praying the *Sh'ma*, reciting *Kaddish*, and a whole host of other Jewish traditions that have origins in the mystical practice of *Kabbalah* or have been influenced by it. Do Christmas trees have any spriritual significance? No, but if none is imputed to it, where's the harm? They're pretty, and for some families – even Messianic families – they are needed for significant family reasons such maintaining family closeness by continuing in longstanding family traditions. Do I think that the Holy Spirit instructs people to have Christmas Trees? Doubtful, unless there are one of those overriding reasons.

Tree decorations. They actually have an intended biblical origin that dates back to when Christians hung apples on their Christmas trees to symbolize the Garden of Eden – a mere step away from using ornaments to give the same appearance.

Santa Claus is out, because his magical powers, his all knowing ability, his omni-presence, and his rewarding of children whom he judges to be “good,” is a clear substitute for God.

Now I can tell that Raphael back there is just busting to ask me the obvious question: Do I have a Christmas Tree in my house. The answer is “no,” and neither do I have any decorative lights other than *Chanukah* lights. It is my choice that represents my desire to project my identity to the world as a Jew. If there were a significant family reason to do otherwise, perhaps I would do otherwise. Perhaps you do, and that is okay.

I would not want Christmas ornaments displayed in any of our services or in our congregational building for the same reason that I have chosen not to have them in my home. We are a Jewish congregation and we should present ourselves that way. However, suppose some ornamentation were to be requested by La Cena, the church with which we share this building. It would be a matter of judgment for the elders – not an automatic “no.” We might say “yes!”

Bottom line: If you visit a member of Ohev during the Christmas season and encounter Christmas lights or a Christmas Tree, don’t freak out! Many of our members come to Messianic Judaism and to Ohev from families and from a world that keeps a Christmas-Tree kind of Christmas, and making a break with that tradition at this particular time may not be good for them. If your concern is your children observing others in Ohev doing Christmas with trees and all, and they wanting you to do likewise when that is not your tradition, just explain to them that your family has chosen a Jewish style of life that carries into this season, and that other families, for their own reasons, have not. Part of training up children is teaching them about diversity, tolerance, and not coveting your neighbor’s Christmas Tree.

I was puzzling over a proper way to conclude this message, and the thought came to me to illustrate my willingness to participate in Christmas by singing you a popular Christmas song. So here goes.

RUDOLPH THE RED-NOSED RABBI

I’m Rudolph the red-nosed rabbi,
I have a very shiny nose.
And if you ever saw it,
You would be convinced it glows.

The other Messianic rabbis
Used to laugh and call me names.
They never let Rabbi Rudolph
Play their Jewish *dreidel* games.

Then one foggy *Chanukah*,
Dan Juster came to say,
Mike Rudolph with your nose so bright
Won't you light Tikkun's *Chanukah* light?

Then all the Rabbis loved me,
As they shouted out with glee,
Rudolph the red-nosed rabbi,
You've-made Messianic history!