

# Defining Our Communal Values

By Michael Rudolph

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If you look at your program of the Conference, you will see that this session is titled “Renewing Foundational Communal Values.” I agonized, both in prayer and in the natural, over how I ought to approach this subject but at first nothing came. Then I tried to persuade Dan that someone else ought to teach in my place, but he just waived me off and told me that the subject he assigned me was one in which I was thoroughly knowledgeable. It was comforting to discover that!

So I went to prayer and asked God: “God, if I know so much about this, why am I having such difficulty receiving inspiration on how to teach it?” And then I did get an inspiration in the way of receiving an answer. My difficulty, it seems, was not with teaching about communal values, but with teaching about renewing them. I was stymied by realizing that we cannot renew something we have not previously had, and I wasn’t at all confident that most of us had ever attempted to analyze and determine what our communal values are.

Some time back, Gary Kivelowitz worked with some of our congregations to define and list our core values and goals, but what I have found is that many of us have not carried the process to completion, and have not adequately communicated the result to our members. As a consequence, many of our members do not have a clear idea of their corporate identity that is rooted in communal values – especially their Messianic Jewish corporate identity. The result has also been that too many of our members lack personal stability, purpose and direction, and are hindered in their Messianic Jewish calling to serve both within and outside of their congregations. So today I won’t be talking about renewing our communal values, but rather about determining and clarifying them.

The first thing we need to understand is that biblical communal values generally have personal counterparts that can be traced to the commandments of Torah. We call them communal values because we exhort our community’s members to adopt them, but the common experience is that some do and some don’t. And when our members don’t personally adopt our community’s declared values, we, the leaders, often do not know it because it is hidden from us by the privacy of their lives.

Now not all values are of equal weight, and when violations come to light, not all demand equal remedies. A member of our congregation who is discovered to be living in adultery and refuses to repent will almost certainly be censured and marked, but a member who eats pork in the privacy of his home is unlikely to receive more than a friendly talking to by his rabbi and friends. But our inability to ensure compliance with certain communal values is no reason for a community not to declare them and, to declare them we have to know them.

The *Torah* and other parts of Scripture contain the commandments from which our communal values are derived. A large number of these commandments date back to Moses and were given as part of what the book of Hebrews refers to as the “first covenant.” But we are now in the New Covenant that was prophesied by Jeremiah as quoted in Hebrews 8:6-13:

*But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah -- not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." In that He says, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.*

Now this is an unpopular passage among many Messianic Jews because, in saying that the Mosaic Covenant is obsolete and in the process of passing away, Hebrews seems to be challenging the very validity of Messianic Judaism that defines itself in relation to the *Torah* of the Covenant and, what's more, it seems to also be challenging our *Torah*-derived values. I don't want to side-track from my subject except to point out that it was the Covenant – the relationship between man and God that changed, not the *Torah*, for according to 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

So God's *Torah* and its derived values are valid in the New Covenant, but we do have a problem. The problem is that much of the *Torah*'s literal application was meant for a different time period and under different circumstances – a time when Yeshua had not yet been born, and when the Holy Spirit had not yet become available to the common man. As a matter of fact, many of the commandments of *Torah* involve animal sacrifice that requires a standing Temple and a functioning Levitical Priesthood, and we have neither. As a result, there is not one biblically prescribed Feast of the Lord that we can keep literally as it was commanded – not *Pesach*, not *Yom haBikkurim*, not *Shavuot*, not *Yom T'ruah*, not *Yom Kippur*, and not *Sukkot*. So what is the answer? The answer is that the Holy Spirit gives us inspiration on how to make valid New Covenant substitutions, and this makes all New Covenant believers (but particularly Messianic Jewish believers) highly reliant on the Holy Spirit for just about everything.

So back to communal values. How do we derive them? By studying *Torah*, the *Nev'im*, the *Ketuvim* and the *Kitvey B'rit Chadasha*, and by opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit for inspired guidance as to what our values ought to be.

Now you, as leaders of your respective communities, are responsible for discerning and formulating your community's values and no one can do it for you. Still, I have given this matter some prayerful consideration of my own, and would offer some ideas for you to consider. I am emboldened to present this by some of the teachings I heard over the past few days where Jewish life in the Holy Spirit was raised as an issue, and where I have a particular point of view or perhaps just an alternative way of expressing what has already been said.

I believe that a Messianic Jewish congregation's communal values are of two kinds – those that are common to all New Covenant communities including Christian Churches, and those that are peculiar to Jewish communities. Among these there is another division – values derived directly from Scripture, and values that, while not contrary to Scripture, are derived mainly from our Jewish culture and traditions.

Now here I want to make a case for Jewish values. All biblical values are historically Jewish, but since the formation of the Christian church, many if not most are viewed by the populace as either generically biblical or even Christian. These are values such as love, justice, honesty, mercy, forgiveness, Holy Spirit, kindness, compassion, hospitality, reconciliation, and such things that, when you analyze them, turn out to be attributes of God Himself. There are many more in this category but there are also some that, while biblically commanded or biblically derived, are more perceived as Jewish.

Consider, for example, the communal value of *dor l'dor* as it applies to Jewish continuity:

*Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."*

The Jewish concept of *dor l'dor* which is derived from [Genesis 17:3-11](#) and [verse 14](#), that I just read, is a value that is only truly applicable to the Jewish people. It says to the Jew that his or her Jewish identity is not a matter of choice but rather one of commanded inheritance that must be passed on to the next generation; it is a value that promotes the Abrahamic Covenant of circumcision in perpetuity in order that Israel can fulfill its various callings, including being a light to the gentile nations.

And there are other communal values unique to Judaism as well. Zionism, for example, is derived from verse 8 of the Genesis passage I just read and is the call for Jews to return to *Eretz Yisrael* in order to receive their inheritance of the Promised Land. And I believe that the Jewish communal value of Talmud Torah or study of the Scriptures can be explained by Paul's rhetorical question in Romans 3:1:

*What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision?*

Paul then answers his own question in verse 2:

*Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.*

The oracles of God are the revelations of God preserved in Scripture.

If I have made an adequate case for determining and clarifying our biblical communal values, then permit me to go a step further and reclaim them all as the historically Jewish values that they are. I believe that presenting our congregations' values as "Jewish" is important because God considers Messianic Jewish congregations to be "Jewish," and letting our values be seen that way brings the truth of who we are home to the wider Jewish community.

Well, now I've gone and done it! I've admitted that I care what the wider Jewish community thinks of us, and that publicizing our communal values in Jewish terms is a good thing to do. Why do I think this? If it is because I am insecure in my Jewish identity and yearn to be accepted by the Jewish community then I am off base and had better repent. But I am not insecure in my identity so that is not the reason. My reason is derived by combining two principles I see in Romans 11:16-27:

*For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in." Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins."*

The first thing that impresses me here is that the cultivated olive tree is owned by all its natural branches -- all Jews whether or not any individual Jew is currently attached to the tree; so the tree is, without doubt, a Jewish tree. But all the Jews are not on the tree. Those who, in their blindness, do not recognize Yeshua as Messiah are broken off and are destined to remain off until they came to faith. That leaves the rest of us, the Messianic Jews, on the tree, so the cultivated olive tree is not only a Jewish tree, it is a Messianic Jewish tree that hosts both wild branches belonging to Gentile Christians, and the natural branches of all believing Jewish members of the otherwise unbelieving Jewish community. It is important to remember, and we often do not, that we who are Messianic Jews are Jews of the circumcision just like all other Jews, and are therefore members of the wider Jewish community by dint of our inheritance. In being “born again” we receive a new spirit, but, as Jews we are the same as all other Jews in being carriers and conveyors to the next generation of the Covenant of Abraham.

The second significant thing I notice in the Romans Scripture is that, eventually, “all Israel will be saved. What this means to me is that Messianic Judaism is the Judaism of the future – the one to which all Jews will one day belong, and which some are ready to join right now. And if that is the case, what we currently call the “wider Jewish community,” we will one day call the “entire Jewish community,” and it will be us. So it makes good sense to me that we right now accept ourselves as a Jewish community that is part of the wider one, and, as such, formulate our communal values so that they will be recognizably Jewish both by the Jews who are already with us, and those who will join us later. Another way of looking at this is that we may as well build Jewish values into our communities now because they will come in anyway when the rest of the Jewish community joins us in faith, and we become normative Judaism.

The Jewish culture is a rich one and its communal values reflect that. To illustrate, here are some of them:

*Tikkun haOlam* – world restoration  
*Malachah* – hard work and completing tasks  
*S’liychah* – forgiveness  
*Emet* – truthfulness, honesty & propriety  
*Torah* – God’s teaching and law  
*Gimilut chasadim* – acts of lovingkindness  
*Shabbat* – Sabbath rest  
*Moedim* – appointed times  
*Kavod horim umorim* – honoring parents & teachers  
*Rachamim* – mercy and compassion  
*Tzedaka* – Justice, righteousness, charity  
*Shalom* – Holistic peace  
*Kashrut* – Laws concerning foods and their preparation  
*Mitzvot* – The commandments of God  
*Mashiach* – Messianic belief (in our case belief in Yeshua)  
*Musar* – Ethical instruction  
*Lashon hara* – evil speech  
*Hachnasat orchim* – welcoming strangers  
*Eretz Yisrael* – the Land of Israel

These are but a few of the communal values traditionally associated with the Jewish world, and, although each one by itself is not unique to Judaism, when presented together and especially when presented along with their Hebrew names, they mark a congregation as Jewish beyond a doubt.

In summary, I believe it is important for all congregations to discover, clarify, and come to terms with their biblical and cultural communal values. I believe it is also important that Messianic Jewish congregations embrace their place in the Jewish world by emphasizing the Jewishness of their communal values -- both their similarity and dissimilarity to the rest of Judaism.

I hope this presentation has been interesting and perhaps a little controversial so it will spark some active discussion in the time we have remaining.