

Messianic Jewish Worship

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For boys who were raised in an observant Jewish home, the emphasis of what we were taught probably had to do with obedience. Go to synagogue, keep *kosher*, keep *Shabbos*, go to Hebrew School, pray Hebrew prayers, study hard, be *Bar Mitzvah'd*, marry a Jewish girl, and become a doctor. If not a doctor, then a dentist or, at the very least (may God protect us all), a lawyer. Girls brought up in an observant Jewish home had their counterpart of expectations as well – also having a lot to do with obedience.

Interestingly, this is not so different than the emphasis on obedience experienced by many young Christian boys. Dress up, go to church on the Lord's Day, observe Christmas and Easter, attend Sunday School, sing in the choir, read the Bible, keep the Ten Commandments, be baptized, don't smoke, drink or dance, marry a Christian girl, acquire a Cadillac, and become a televangelist.

Of course, these two scenarios are poking fun at the religious and ethnic superficialities that many of us have experienced in growing up, but they have a serious purpose as well. They point to the prevailing fact that we have been taught to relate to God more through doing things than through experiencing Him and submitting ourselves to Him heart and soul. But the two ways are both valid and go hand in hand, for as we read Sha'ul's words in Roman 10:8-13:

"But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Yeshua is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (NIV)

Confessing with our mouth is the obedience part, and believing with faith in Yeshua's Lordship is the heart-relational part.

But once our salvation is assured, what then? We purpose not to sin and, if we do we repent, and that is a continuation of our commitment to obedience. But what about the relational part? How do we continue in that? Is our relationship with our heavenly Father limited to just obedience and devoid of human emotion? To help answer the question, let's ask ourselves this: What is our experience with other relationships that God gives to us? Do they not all have some emotional component to them? Of course they do, and so ought our relationship with our heavenly Father. God Himself told us how he wants us to relate to Him when He gave us Deuteronomy 6:5:

"Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (NIV)

The words “All your heart,” “all your soul,” and “all your strength” are emotion-packed relational words.

Now this has been an introduction to what I really want to speak to you about today which is worship. Although it is technically possible to worship God without our hearts and souls being poured into it, that is not what God desires. I have heard “worship” defined in several ways – some ways that suggest emotional investment, and some that do not. For example, we could consider our worship of God as recognizing His deity; obeying only Him; putting Him on a pedestal for praise; kneeling before Him; revering Him; submitting to Him; sacrificing to Him; devoting ourselves to Him. None of these ways of worshipping God necessarily require emotion but, without the infusion of emotion, much is missing. Let’s therefore put emotion back in by adding to our definition of worship, concepts such as loving Him with all our heart, soul, and strength, adoring Him, experiencing ecstasy in His presence, and being sent to our knees by His glory. God’s overwhelming affect on men is clearly seen in Isaiah 6:1-5 (NIV):

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. “Woe to me!” I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.’”

Isaiah spoke these words after being overwhelmed by God, yet we do not usually associate such ecstatic emotion with Jewish worship. Pentecostal worship “yes,” but Jewish worship “no.” It is because, over the years, the expectation of emotion in Jewish worship has been lost, much in the same way as Jewish rootedness was lost in the Church. Here are some examples from the Bible of emotion in Jewish worship which, if they occurred today, would probably not be recognized as either appropriate or Jewish by many in the wider Jewish community:

“Then Peter said, “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Messiah Yeshua of Nazareth, rise up and walk.” And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them-- walking, leaping, and praising God.” (Act 3:6-8 NKJ)

“Then David danced before the LORD with all his might; and David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet. Now as the ark of the LORD came into the City of David, Michal, Saul's daughter, looked through a window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.” (2Sa 6:14-16 NKJ)

*“Praise the LORD! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty firmament!
Praise Him for His mighty acts; Praise Him according to His excellent greatness! Praise*

Him with the sound of the trumpet; Praise Him with the lute and harp! Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes! Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!” (Psa 150:1-6 NKJ)

“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?” (Psa 42:1-2 NKJ)

“How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the LORD; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.” (Psa 84:1-2 NKJ)

“Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth; break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises. Sing to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of a psalm, with trumpets and the sound of a horn; shout joyfully before the LORD, the King. Let the sea roar, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell in it; Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills be joyful together.” (Psa 98:4-8 NKJ)

Most Jewish worship today is essentially what is contained within the *Siddur*, which is praying, singing, bowing, praising, blessing, thanking, occasionally fasting, and once a year laying prostrate; of course, before 70 AD, the Temple sacrifices were a major component of Jewish worship. Orthodox synagogues today use no musical instruments; Conservative synagogues generally do not, and Reform synagogues allow the use of organs. Dancing is not part of a Jewish service, but choirs are fairly common, and occasionally we hear about a contemporary Jewish group that employs modern musical instruments.

As you can see, modern Jewish worship is mainly liturgical, somewhat subdued, and typically lacking in spontaneity and emotion. By contrast, Jewish worship in days gone by, while also liturgical (because of the requirements of the Temple), contained a spontaneous and expressive component that was authorized by God, and was part of the normal Jewish experience.

So has modern Judaism lost its spontaneity completely? No it did not thanks to the *Chasidim* who seek to connect spiritually to God through animated, musical, and sometimes mystical ways. Their conservative way of dressing is in stark contrast to their exuberant way of worshiping that includes dancing, singing lyric-less *nigunim*, and generally making lots of noise. Their goal in this is to experience the presence of God, and they know that only through the Spirit can that be accomplished.

Now I do not want to endorse the *Chasidim* beyond their style of worship because they are involved in some serious errors. For one thing, they reject Yeshua as being the Messiah. For another, some of their mystical approaches to God are patently unbiblical, and they are heavily involved in the study and practice of *Kabalah*. I will mention one more, which is that *Chasidic* communities are centered around a *Rebbe* whom they deem to have a special connection to God. The late Menachem Mendel Schneerson is the *Rebbe* of the *Chabad-Lubavitch* movement, and is thought, by many of his followers to be the Messiah.

All that notwithstanding, Messianic Jews have something in common with the *Chasidim* that is very important. It is our common understanding of John 4:24 (although *Chasidim* would not acknowledge the Scripture), that:

“*God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*” (NKJ)

We as they, believe that by giving ourselves fully to worship, we can experience the very presence of God. Of course, we do not agree with them on who is the Messiah nor with their other *shtick*, but we do agree that the *Ru'ach HaKodesh* is the essence of God's presence in the world.

I am telling you all this in order to illustrate, and to assure you, that Ohev Yisrael's “charismatic” approach to praise and worship is thoroughly Jewish both in its history, and in what it seeks to achieve which is experiencing the presence of God. We use musical instruments, and our melodies are different than those of the *Chasidim*, but our expectation of experiencing God through music and dance is the same. Another thing we have in common with *Chasidim* is that both they and we believe we can actually HEAR FROM GOD – we through the *Ru'ach HaKodesh* directly, and they indirectly through their *Rebbe*. As do other Jews, Messianic Jews and *Chasidim* pray liturgically from our respective *Siddurim* but, more than other Jews, we are aware that we can experience the presence of God through fervent worship.

In the course of its development in the Twentieth Century, Messianic Jewish worship was significantly impacted by Christian culture and, in our desire to save it from assimilation, some of us began looking only to Orthodox and Conservative worship forms as being authentic. That was a mistake for those who did, and one that I want to either avoid or correct if it exists among any of us at Ohev. The traditional liturgical forms can (and ought to be) a large part of our worship, but we must do two things as well; (1) we must adjust them to be consistent with the Messiah and other New Covenant realities, and (2) we must allow ourselves to also be participatory in Jewish charismatic worship that heightens our emotions and enhances our capacity to experience the presence of God.

So what is Jewish charismatic worship and how do we distinguish it from the kind that is foreign to us? I can't give you a precise answer because we are in the middle of a movement of God and He is not yet finished moving us. What I can say is that, early on, God gave us worship leaders like Paul Wilbur, music groups like *Kol Simcha* and the “Wailing Wall,” and Jewish concepts of charismatic worship such as “Davidic Dance.” Our own Bruce Bakaysa, a refugee from Orthodox Christianity, was brought to our Movement by God and gifted to compose Messianic music and to lead in a contemporary charismatic form of Jewish worship. God is not finished developing Bruce either, but he is our gift from God, so let's open ourselves to follow his leadership.

That's pretty much all I have to say, but let me leave you with some key Scriptures that depict the biblical normalcy of expressive movement and emotion in Jewish worship:

Bowing Down and Kneeling

“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. For He is our God, And we are the people of His pasture, And the sheep of His hand.”

(Psa 95:6-7 NKJ)

Laying Prostrate

“And I fell down before the LORD, as at the first, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sin which you committed in doing wickedly in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger.” (Deu 9:18 NKJ)

“So it was, that while they were killing them, I was left alone; and I fell on my face and cried out, and said, ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Will You destroy all the remnant of Israel in pouring out Your fury on Jerusalem?’” (Eze 9:8 NKJ)

Clapping Hands

“Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples! Shout to God with the voice of triumph!”

(Psa 47:1 NKJ)

Lifting Hands

“Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name.” (Psa 63:3-4 NKJ)

“Behold, bless the LORD, All you servants of the LORD, Who by night stand in the house of the LORD! Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, And bless the LORD.” (Psa 134:1-2 NKJ)

“Let us lift our hearts and hands To God in heaven.” (Lam 3:41 NKJ)

Dancing

“Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes!”

(Psa 150:4 NKJ)

“Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.” (Exo 15:20 NKJ)

“Let them praise His name with the dance; Let them sing praises to Him with the timbrel and harp.” (Psa 149:3 NKJ)

Shouting

“Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!” (Psa 32:11 NKJ)

“Cry out and shout, O inhabitant of Zion, For great is the Holy One of Israel in your midst!”

(Isa 12:6 NKJ)

“Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.”
(Psa 95:1-2 NKJ)

Singing

“All the earth shall worship You And sing praises to You; They shall sing praises to Your name.” (Psa 66:4 NKJ)

“My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing to You, And my soul, which You have redeemed.:”
(Psa 71:23 NKJ)

“And Miriam answered them: ‘Sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!’” (Exo 15:21 NKJ)

In conclusion, let’s remember that Jewish charismatic worship is not merely a matter of style – of lifting our hands or dancing in the Spirit – but it is a way of connecting with God that is compelled by our openness to the presence and power of the *Ru’ach HaKodesh*. So let’s not label charismatic worship as “Christian” and shrink from it, but rather let us embrace it as fundamentally and historically “Jewish,” and help develop it and return it to its former place in the prayer life of the Jewish people.