

Ministering to Jewish People

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START WITH FRIENDSHIP

Outside of there being a pastoral or counseling relationship, friendship is the very best environment for ministering biblical faith to anyone, including to Jewish people. There are levels of friendship that go from intimacy to casual acquaintance, and we seize our opportunities wherever and whenever the Holy Spirit brings people across our paths.

To begin with, Jewish people are no different than any other people, in that they can choose to believe in God or not, and to believe in Yeshua or not, and they can choose to conduct their lives in either godly or ungodly ways. Jewish people have problems in life as we all do and, if we want to help, being a friend or even a listening ear is the best way to start. We may be burning with a desire to share the truths of the Bible, the fatherhood of God or the gospel of Yeshua, but none of it will be received unless the Holy Spirit has been there ahead of you.

BE AT PEACE WITH OUR OWN IDENTITIES

Before we attempt to befriend a Jewish person (or anyone else for that matter), we should understand and be at peace with our own identities in the Lord. Some of us are Jews and inheritors of the Abrahamic Covenant. Although we are theologically at odds with many of our Jewish brothers regarding the identity of Yeshua, we are, nevertheless, family. Some of us are Gentiles and, although we have joined our lives with Messianic Jews, worship as Jews, and are members of a Messianic Jewish community, we nevertheless are not natural inheritors of the Abrahamic Covenant. Yet, as grafted-in 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, those of us who are Gentiles may not be in quite the same family relationship with our Jewish counterparts, but we are, nevertheless, fellow citizens in Messiah.

UNDERSTAND 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.

One should understand that there is no universal characteristic of a Jewish person. Jews come in all colors, all languages, all cultures, all citizenships, and all beliefs. Not far from the truth is the Chinese Jew who greets the Ashkenaz Rabbi from New York by saying: "Funny, you don't look Jewish!" Being a Jew is defined biblically by one's generational lineage and circumcision, not by one's appearance (Genesis 17:4, 6-7, 19-21; 26:1-4; 28:10-14; 35:9-12; 48:3-4; 50:24-25). It is also important to distinguish between being a Jew by birth, and being culturally Jewish. "Jewishness" is the criterion upon which many Jews base their identity. A Jew does not recognize another Jew by his genotype or by his 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 Jewish? 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? 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 main branches of Judaism? Is he a *Chassid*?

At the risk of generalizing, I admit that we Jews are known for having some characteristics in common. We argue a lot – particularly with each other – and some of us mistrust the *Goyim*. We dislike being looked down on by Christians, and 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 understand exactly what that means.

Significantly, not all Jews are secure in their Jewish identity; I suspect that this is partly a legacy of the holocaust and the history of *Goyim* telling Jews that they are inferior, heretical, evil, and “Christ-killers.” But it also comes from strife within our own communities, where certain Jews routinely discriminate against and reject other Jews – even to the extent of denying their right to emigrate to Israel. 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 Israeli Orthodox, who have significant political control over making *Aliyah*, and refuse to recognize Messianic Jews as being qualified for *Aliyah*. All of this is to say that one should look for, and become familiar with, one’s friends’ Jewish sensitivities, and try to avoid stumbling into areas of unhealed hurts and insecurities.

IMPEDIMENTS TO JEWISH FRIENDSHIP

Gentiles in our Messianic congregations sometimes think that it is easier for the Jews in their congregations to befriend Jews than it is for them. That is often not the case because a Gentile is expected to believe in Jesus, whereas a Jew who believes in Jesus is perceived by other Jews as a threat and a traitor to Judaism. Whether we are Messianic Jews or Gentiles, we may have presuppositions and fears that cause us to draw back from pursuing friendships within the Jewish Community.

Fear of rejection is a “*biggee*” 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 tell you that your overture of friendship to a particular 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 in faith, you will eventually find yourself with a circle of Jewish acquaintances and even friends whom you will enjoy, and who will enjoy you.

A 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 that you will ever be able gain access. That is simply not so. There are always going to be people, Jews included, whose main purpose in life seem to be to exclude others. You’ll run into them, but there will be many others whose nature it will be to welcome newcomers of every stripe.

Another presupposition that may hinder some of us in seeking Jewish friends (this particularly applies to Gentiles) is that Gentiles sometimes think that Jews know so much more about the Bible than they do, and that they will discredit themselves in any conversation that turns toward

religious things. That is just not so. Sure, there are some in the Jewish Community that are scholars, but they are relatively few. My personal experience has been that most Messianic Jews and Gentiles with several years in the faith, have a much greater knowledge of the Bible than the average synagogue-attending Jew, and almost certainly greater than most secular Jews.

Another thing that can interfere with forming friendships with Jews and Gentiles alike, is giving into one's self-imposed urgency to preach the Gospel of Yeshua to persons whom the Holy Spirit has not prepared. It is important that we concentrate on being a friend without strings attached, and that we trust God to guide us in what to say when the time is right.

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 the meetings. The second is to go to 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 everywhere. 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.

Places where Jewish people hang out are where we should be hanging out, but how many of us do? We should all be subscribing to at least one Jewish newspaper in order to be apprised of local Jewish activities that we can attend. 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 local service organization will undoubtedly bring us into contact with potential Jewish friends. And don't forget the local synagogue. I heard that there are occasionally Jewish people there as well. 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.

WHAT WE HAVE TO OFFER JEWS IN FRIENDSHIP

Jews are no different than other people. Some are lonely, some are needy, some have interests they are burning to share with others, some do not believe in God, and most do not believe in Yeshua. Friends – especially Messianic friends – can help fill these needs. A common need that a Messianic Jew or Gentile can fill is to inform his Jewish friend that being Jewish is important. That may surprise you since the Scriptures clearly expound on the importance of being Jewish. The problem is that most Jewish people are not educated in the Scriptures, and regrettably their concept of Jewish identity is a combination of culture, nostalgia, and regret. “Culture,” because most Jews arrive at adulthood with early memories and experiences that are culturally Jewish. “Nostalgia,” because many of his or her memories and past experiences are sweet. “Regret,” because some early memories are also painful, as some have lost family members, have experienced personal rejections, and have been denied professional, economic, or social opportunities on account of being Jewish.

In general, Jews have always been reminded that they are different from other people, and not in a complementary way. As a result, many Jews are suspicious of the non-Jewish world, and expect that there will come a time when their Gentile neighbors will once again turn against

them. Many Jews support Israel, not because it is a fulfillment of God's promises, but because it is a place of refuge to where Jews can escape when the pogroms start up again.

Jewish people need to be made aware that the real calling of being Jewish is to serve – that a Jew's circumcision is more than just a custom – it is a sign of the Covenant that God made with Abraham – assuring him that his family through Isaac and Jacob would be priests to the rest of the world. We need to help our Jewish friends to not turn inward out of fear, but rather to exercise faith and turn outward, because God has given them the high calling and responsibility of preserving His Word and spreading it to others – not only His *Torah*, but also the Good News of Yeshua.

An area, in which Ohev Yisrael members are uniquely equipped to contribute is in providing information and advice on maintaining Jewish identity within mixed marriage families. This is important because many Jews are married to Christians. Serving mixed marriages ought to be our specialty because, not only do we have experience with it, but we understand biblical covenant better than most, and stand theologically in a place that reconciles Judaism with many of the beliefs of Christianity. Finally, and not to be undervalued, Ohev Yisrael is a community that is ready and willing to receive mixed marriage families as members, and to disciple them in bring up their children as Yeshua-believing Jews.

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF JEWISH FRIENDSHIP

The most important part of developing Jewish friendships is to be genuine. DON'T talk down to, or unduly elevate a friend merely because he or she is Jewish. As is the case other nationalities, events of history and human conflicts have produced fears and sensitivities of which we need to be aware. From antiquity and especially since the middle ages, Jews have been an ostracized minority. They have been called "Christ Killers," been accused of causing the bubonic plague, were reputed to have ritually killed Christian children, were said to have seized control of the world's economies, and on and on. In Spain and Portugal, many were killed for their beliefs, some exiled, and others forcibly converted to Catholicism. In Germany, the Nazis cloaked themselves with the trappings of Christianity through their use of iron crosses, twisted crosses, and the complicity of Christian churches.

When you are conversing with a Jewish friend about Yeshua, DON'T use the common evangelistic expression "convert to Christianity." Technically, a "Christian" is simply a "believer in Messiah Yeshua," and the Bible meaning of "convert" is to change one's nature, and embrace God. To most Jews, however, the word "convert" means to stop being a Jew, and the word "Christian" means "non-Jew," and possibly the kind of "non-Jew" who killed and tortured the Jewish people. Ideas like these are so deeply and emotionally ingrained in Jews from childhood, that terminology is very important when relating to Jewish friends. On the American Jewish scene, "Christ," "cross," "baptize," and "church" are not favorable words to Jews because Jews associate these words with things that are not Jewish, and with Christians who have persecuted them. That is why most Messianic Jewish congregations use equivalent but non-inflammatory terms such as "Messiah," "execution stake," "immerse," and "congregation." Please take this seriously. It is egregious to the Jewish ear to hear a Messianic Jew or a Messianic Gentile say that he or she is "going to church," when what is meant is one's congregation or one's Messianic synagogue.

Now this is very important. DON'T try to minister Yeshua to a Jewish person who doesn't even believe in God. Regrettably, that is the condition of a very large number of Jewish people that we call "secular." Secular Jews need to be challenged to consider the existence of God through the things with which they are familiar. Ask them to consider that which they know about or can see around them. The beauty of nature where the existence of beauty has no benefit; the illogic of humans acting sacrificially for strangers; men driven to act against self-interest on account of their consciences; the implausibility of complex living creatures such as we, evolving from a primordial soup of amino acids; a universe that big-banged into existence from "what?" And where did the "what?" come from?

DON'T assume that a Jewish person cares about after-life salvation or has even thought about it. The most common Christian approach to evangelism is to present New Testament Scriptures showing that one must confess Jesus as Lord and Savior if one wants eternal life after death (as compared to going to hell or being destroyed in a lake of fire). I am not saying that the approach is never effective with Jewish people, but it is almost never effective because (1) Jews typically don't believe the New Testament, and (2) if they believe in God and have ever thought about having an after-life, they assume they are destined for it through good works, and they tend to not worry about it. What seems to be of more interest is attaining a closer and more familial relationship with God than the one that he or she might have at present. It has been my experience that, after a closer relationship is achieved, he or she becomes more open to hearing and considering what the New Testament has to say about Yeshua.

There are several other "DON'Ts" that I could mention, but let me give you just one more. DON'T refer to a Jew who believes in God but does not believe in Yeshua. as an "unbeliever" or as "unsaved." If a person believes in God, he or she is not an unbeliever – he or she is a believer in God, even if not a believer in Yeshua. It is insulting and wrong to call such a person an "unbeliever" without qualifying what we mean. As for calling a person (Jew or Gentile) "unsaved," that, in my opinion, is a judgment that only God can make. If you call your friend "unsaved," you are implying that he or she is not worthy of eternal life in God's eyes and, if it gets back him or her that you said that, the likely result will be that your friend will become your "former" friend.

Now for some "DO's." As a Jew or Gentile in a Messianic Jewish congregation, DO maintain a "Jewish" home. Keep some level of *kashrut* even if it is limited only to abstaining from biblically prohibited meats. Maintain a small visible Jewish library for your reading and reference; even one shelf will do. Display Jewish artifacts, and DON'T display crosses and pictures of Jesus.

DO have Bible knowledge, and at least a conversational knowledge of Rabbinical Judaism.

DO know the basics of Jewish history and its intersection with Church history.

DO be conversant with basic Jewish apologetics, which is arguing and proving the existence of God and the Messiahship of Yeshua through Scripture.

DO have an *aleph-bet* knowledge of Hebrew, and know your way around the *siddur* – especially those prayers commonly used on the Sabbath.

DO develop a vocabulary of Jewish terms – terms like *Tanakh*, *moshiach*, *Torah*, etc.

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 keep the Sabbath by not doing ordinary work, and by attending services.

DO be prepared to answer typical Jewish questions about Yeshua, such as “How can one believe in Him and still remain a Jew?” Also be prepared to answer common objections such as “If he is the *Mashiach*, why do we still have wars?”

DO show hospitality. Invite your Jewish friends to your home, and accept invitations to theirs. Share meals together, know the commonly used *b'rachot*, and know how to conduct an *Erev Shabbat* home service.

DO look for non-religious activities to enjoy with your Jewish friends; normal friendships include sharing hobbies, entertainment, family celebrations, and so forth.

DO invite your Jewish friends to your *chavurah* or your congregation's Shabbat service. If they agree to come, describe what they will experience in advance of their attending.

DO pray for your Jewish friends, and believe that, in God's timing, they will come to faith.

Finally, DO disregard any or all of the guidelines presented herein if the Holy Spirit directs you otherwise.

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN MINISTERING TO A JEWISH PERSON

- What is your relationship with the person to whom you wish to minister? What difference will that make in ministering to him or her?
- How did the subject of religion arise in your conversation?
- Are you (the person who is ministering) a Jew or a Gentile? What difference will that make in ministering to this person?
- Are the person's mother and father both Jewish?
- Is the person's family Ashkenaz or Sephardic?
- Does the person, his parents, or his grandparents speak Yiddish?
- Did the person, his parents, or his grandparents come to this country from Israel or some other country?
- Did the person lose family members in the holocaust, or has he/she or his/her family suffered persecution in other ways?
- What is the person's synagogue experience, and in what denomination of synagogue?
- Does the person resonate with Jewish culture, or is he or she turned off by it?

- What is the person's level and field of secular and Jewish education? Where were they obtained?
- Is the person *Torah*-observant? On what level?
- Is the person positive toward his or her Jewish identity?
- Does the person express a desire or need to become closer to God? What is his or her reason?
- Does the person believe in God? If so, what does he or she believe about God?
- Has the person heard of Yeshua (Jesus)? What does he or she know and believe about Yeshua?
- Does the person believe that the Jewish Bible is inspired and true? What does he or she believe about it?
- If the person believes that any part of the *Tanakh* is true, does he or she know that it contains prophecies of a future Messiah?
- Has the person read any part of the New Testament? What does he or she know and believe about it?
- Does the person have any presuppositions about God or Judaism that will impede that which you are attempting to minister?
- Does the person have questions that you cannot answer? Don't be intimidated by not knowing; be willing to find an answer.
- Is the person interested in visiting your home, your *chavurah*, or congregation? By all means invite him or her, but let him or her know in advance what to expect.