

# Participating in the Wider Jewish Community

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It may surprise some of you to know that not all Messianic Jewish Congregations consider themselves to be Jewish, and part of the wider Jewish community. Perhaps it doesn't surprise you, because you know that many in the wider Jewish world do not consider Messianic Jews Jewish and part of them. Not only that, but many in the Church see it the same way – that, because we believe in Jesus, we are part of the Church and are therefore not Jewish, because everyone knows that Jews don't believe in Jesus. Right? Wrong! Those among us who were born Jewish are still Jewish. We have been through that already, and for us it is a settled matter.

But what isn't settled is what it means to be Jewish beyond just having Jewish genes. Is our congregational community a part of wider Judaism, or some kind of third species? After I came to faith in 1976 and joined Beth Messiah Congregation in Rockville Maryland, I didn't consider Beth Messiah "**Jewish**;" I and the other Beth Messiah members considered our congregation "**Messianic Jewish**" – part of the Christian world – not part of the Jewish world. To us at that time, the wider Jewish world was completely bankrupt because it did not believe in Yeshua. In our eyes, only we were the true and continuing Judaism, and the only hope for anything good coming out of the other Judaism was for it to repent and become part of us.

I will return to speaking about Messianic Jewish Congregations in a moment, but first I want to say a few words about the Jews who populate them. Over the years I changed my views about my identity as a Messianic Jew – not about the importance of believing in Yeshua, but about my identity as a Jew among Jews – all Jews – not just Messianic Jews. And I changed my views about the capacity and continuing responsibility of Jewish non-believers in Yeshua to serve God with the godly attributes they possess. What changed my views? Primarily two things: (1) Exodus 19:5-6, and (2) the Jews who inhabit Israel. First the Exodus 19 Scripture:

"Now if you will pay careful attention to what I say and keep my covenant, then you will be my own treasure from among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you will be a kingdom of *cohanim* [priests] for me, a nation set apart.' These are the words you are to speak to the people of Isra'el."

I had read that Scripture soon after I came to faith, but the depth of it didn't hit me at first; it had to grow on me. My initial understanding was that my sole responsibility as a Jewish believer in Yeshua was to minister Yeshua to my fellow Jews who did not believe, and bring them to salvation. I understood that I was to minister to those others that God might cause to cross my path as well, but I saw my principle role as ministering to Jews, with eternal life being the only end product that I envisioned or thought to be of value. It is an understatement to say that I was influenced by the evangelical points of view that I had been taught.

But, over time, Exodus 19:5-6 and also Genesis 17:4-5 impacted my thinking. Genesis 17:4-5 says:

"As for me, this is my covenant with you: you will be the father of many nations. Your name will no longer be Avram [exalted father], but your name will be Avraham [father of many], because I have made you the father of many nations."

The significance of Abraham being the "father of many nations" began to grow on me. "Many nations." Why "many nations?" Didn't God make His Covenant with Abraham to be the father of the Jewish nation? I had always thought of Abraham as being the patriarch of the Jews, but this seemed to be saying something much more expansive. And then the Exodus 19 Scripture. God said that those following Moses, the Israelites (later to be called Jews), were to be a "kingdom of priests" – "a nation set apart." Priests to whom? To themselves? That doesn't make sense, so we must be priests to the other nations – the Gentile nations of the world.

So I, a Jewish believer in Yeshua, am a priest. Awesome! But God wasn't speaking to Messianic Jews in Exodus 19:5-6, He was speaking to just plain Jews. More and more, I saw that the covenantal responsibility of being priests to the Gentiles of the world was given to all Jews, and that a Jew does not abrogate his responsibility to the covenant by not recognizing Yeshua.

Now why do I say that the Jews in Israel influenced my thinking? It is because the majority of the Jews in Israel today are not believers in Yeshua and yet, every day of their existence is a priestly testimony to the rest of the world of God's existence. They are largely unaware of it, but they are serving God through their very lives. Now don't get me wrong. A Jew who has not embraced Yeshua, the Holy Spirit, and the New Covenant, cannot function as fully in his priestly calling as one who has, but that does not mean that he is released from his covenant responsibility and has nothing of God with which to serve.

Now that I have explained my beliefs concerning the covenant responsibilities of individual Jews, both Messianic and non-Messianic, I will return to what I began to speak about, which are Messianic Jewish congregations and Ohev Yisrael in particular. As I have said, some Messianic Jewish congregations consider themselves "Jewish," and some do not. Ohev Yisrael does consider itself Jewish because it sees itself as a home for Messianic Jews, and Messianic Jews are Jewish. And since the Messianic Jews within Ohev have a covenantal Jewish responsibility, so does Ohev. That is not controversial; what is controversial is whether, by virtue of our being a "Jewish" congregation, we are genuinely part of the wider Jewish community of congregations. They say "No," and we say "Yes."

Now is that merely *chutzpah* on our part. Let's take our queue from the Bible:

Matthew 4:23-24: "Yeshua went all over the Galil teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, and healing people from every kind of disease and sickness. Word of him spread throughout all Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill, suffering from various diseases and pains, and those held in the power of demons, and epileptics and paralytics; and he healed them."

We see that Yeshua spent much time, and ministered healing in local synagogues, and God used His participation in Jewish religious life to spread His Word.

Similarly, in Matthew 13:53-54, we see that Yeshua taught in his childhood synagogue:

"When Yeshua had finished these parables, he left and went to his home town. There he taught them in their synagogue in a way that astounded them, so that they asked, "Where do this man's wisdom and miracles come from?"

And in Luke 4:33-36, we read that Yeshua cast out demons in the synagogue:

"In the synagogue there was a man who had an unclean demonic spirit, who shouted in a loud voice, "Yaah! What do you want with us, Yeshua from Natzeret? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are- the Holy One of God!" But Yeshua rebuked it: "Be quiet, and come out of him!" The demonic spirit threw the man down in the middle of the crowd and came out of him, having done him no harm. They were all astounded and said to one another, "What kind of teaching is this? Why, he gives orders with power and authority to the unclean spirits, and they come out!"

Yeshua also frequented the Holy Temple; Matthew 21:12-14 is just one of the instances where he healed the blind and the lame:

"Yeshua entered the Temple grounds and drove out those who were doing business there, both the merchants and their customers. He upset the desks of the money-changers and knocked over the benches of those who were selling pigeons. He said to them, "It has been written, 'My house will be called a house of prayer.' But you are making it into a den of robbers!" Blind and lame people came up to him in the Temple, and he healed them."

And, very significant, is that Yeshua ministered in ordinary places within the Jewish community as well:

Luke 4:38-40: "Leaving the synagogue, he went to Shim'on's house. Shim'on's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him to do something for her. So, standing over her, he rebuked the fever; and it left her. She immediately got up and began helping them. After sunset, all those who had people sick with various diseases brought them to Yeshua, and he put his hands on each one of them and healed them;"

Okay, you say, "That was Yeshua, and we are not Yeshua; we are his disciples." Well then, consider one of His disciples, the Apostle Paul. He ministered in the synagogue and the Temple. We read in Acts 17:1-3:

"After passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia, Sha'ul and Sila came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue. According to his usual practice, Sha'ul went in; and on three *Shabbats* he gave them *drashes* from the *Tanakh*, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and that "this Yeshua whom I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah."

In another occasion, in the Temple, the results were less positive:

Acts 21:27-30: "The seven days were almost up when some unbelieving Jews from the province of Asia saw him in the Temple, they stirred up all the crowd and grabbed him. "Men of Isra'el, help!" they shouted. "This is the man who goes everywhere teaching everyone things against the people, against the *Torah* and against this place! And now he has even brought some *Goyim* into the Temple and defiled this holy place! (They had previously seen Trophimus from Ephesus in the city with him, and assumed that Sha'ul had brought him into the Temple.) The whole city was aroused, and people came running from all over. They seized Sha'ul and dragged him out of the Temple, and at once the gates were shut."

I don't know why I am giving you just these few examples. I might as well have handed you the entire New Testament, since all of Yeshua's, and a substantial amount of His disciples' times were spent among and within the wider Jewish community of their day – in Judaism's institutions and in ordinary places, but clearly among Jews who did not believe that Yeshua was whom He claimed to be, and whom He was. It was natural for them to do so, because the wider Jewish community was the community into which they were born. Yes, they formed new communities of believers and fellowshiped there also but, except for when some of them (like Paul) travelled to predominantly Gentile cities, they connected with their Jewish people wherever they were.

Now what about us at Ohev? We call Ohev a Jewish congregation and think of ourselves as part of the wider Jewish community, but what about that is reality? Do we as a congregation participate in or contribute to Jewish works that are not Messianic? The answer is "No!" Do we as a congregation have a relationship with even one Orthodox, Conservative or Reform synagogue or with one rabbi? The answer is "No!" "Do our members belong to Jewish organizations, make use of facilities at Jewish Community Centers, participate in Jewish causes, and occasionally visit other synagogues? A very few of us do, but generally the answer is also "No!" So, on what basis do we say that Ohev is part of the wider Jewish world? We explain our non-participation by saying that we have been rejected in the past, and that we will surely not be allowed to participate. But have we tried? Have we pressed in? Yes, we have been rejected, and often are still rejected, but don't we, by our attitude of isolation, reject them as well? Did the Apostle Paul quit trying because he was rejected?

I would like there to be, for Ohev and Ohev members, the dawning of a new day of Jewish Community participation, making it a reality that we are a Jewish congregation and a legitimate part of the wider Jewish community. To help us move in that direction, I have asked Hilary Weiner to research and make available to us, opportunities in Virginia, DC and Maryland, where our members who desire it can participate in Jewish activities and be among Jewish people in the process. These include attending lectures, joining and volunteering in Jewish organizations, joining the local JCC, attending synagogue services, helping out at cultural events, supporting causes for Israel, and many others.

What I am proposing is that we be part of the wider Jewish community as a natural extension of our lives, while not hiding our faith in Yeshua. The idea is to normalize our lives as Jews or Gentiles among Jews. It is not to overtly evangelize, but I am confident that, over time, the testimony of our Messianic faith will shine through loud and clear. In concert with this, I am also proposing that we begin using the minor Jewish holidays (days that we don't have services)

to join with the wider Jewish community in their observances. One such day coming up is *Yom HaShoah*, or Holocaust Remembrance Day. This year, it falls on April 28, and there will be many activities on that day from which we can select.

I said earlier that some members of Ohev are already involved in the general Jewish community, so I invited a few of them to share their experiences with you.