

Who We Are & What We Are About

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We who practice Messianic Judaism are often challenged to explain ourselves – who we are, and what we are about. Questions that may be posed are: “What is Messianic Judaism?” or “What is a Messianic Jew?” Or, if we are a Gentile who worships in a Messianic Jewish congregation, a question to us might be: “How can your religion be Messianic Judaism if you are not a Jew?” Answering these questions is not always simple, and it is my hope is that this message will take us a step forward in being able to respond in a clear and coherent way when the need arises.

Whether we are a Jew or a non-Jew, our explanation of what Messianic Judaism is might be:

“Messianic Judaism is a New Covenant Judaism that is practiced in a congregational context by *Torah*-observant Jewish and Gentile followers of Messiah Yeshua. Our inspired Scriptures are the *Tanakh* (called “the Old Testament” by some), and the *Kitvei B’rit Chadasha* (the New Testament); we do not consider the writings of *Talmud* inspired. Scripture teaches that if we repent of our sins, we are forgiven if we accept the vicarious sacrifice of Yeshua, and that today we are able to relate to God through the *Ruach Hakodesh* (the Holy Spirit) in a more intimate way than would have been possible (for most of us) had we lived during the time of Moses.”

That was a little wordy, so we may prefer the UMJC’s basic statement:

“The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) envisions Messianic Judaism as a movement of Jewish congregations and groups committed to Yeshua that embrace the covenantal responsibility of Jewish life and identity rooted in *Torah*, expressed in tradition, and renewed and applied in the context of the New Covenant.”

The conversation is not likely to end with one question, and follow-up questions from both Jews and Christians might include:

“How can you say that you are a Jew if you believe in Jesus? Haven’t you become a Christian?” Or if we are Gentile, the question to us might be: “If you practice Messianic Judaism (or any Judaism for that matter), haven’t you *de facto* become a Jewish convert?”

Some questions might be more theological and even accusatory:

“You say that those in Messianic Judaism believe in Jesus. Why then do you call your religion Judaism and not Christianity?”

“If your religious practice is a form of Judaism, surely you must know that the *Talmud* refers to Jesus in a disparaging way.”

“You say that Messianic Jews are a part of the wider Jewish community. How can you say that, when most of the Jewish world says that they are not?”

“What do you mean when you say that you believe in Jesus but are *Torah*-observant? In Romans 6:14 (NKJ), Paul says that we are “no longer under law but under grace.”

I could continue to list the possible questions that we may be asked, but there is not enough time in this message for me to address them all. Permit me, therefore, to present a selective overview of Messianic Judaism in a way that I hope will be helpful.

The first thing on which we should be clear (or at least take a stand) is the difference between being a Jew (Messianic or otherwise), and being a practitioner of Judaism (Messianic or otherwise). Judaism (and there are several variations) can broadly be defined as the religion of the Jews, and a Jew is a person whose inherited identity traces back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Some say that Jewish inheritance must be through the mother, some say through the father, and some say through either. The predominant view within Messianic Judaism is that it is through either. There is also the question of whether a non-Jew can join the Jewish lineage through a process of adoption called conversion. Those who say “yes,” contend that Ruth of the Bible joined Israel in that way through her initial utterance to Naomi: “Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God” (Ruth 1:16), and through the Israelite leaders’ subsequent endorsement of her marriage to Boaz (Ruth 4:9-12). The logic of those who hold that view is that, had Ruth remained a Moabitess after she spoke those covenant words, the leaders of Israel could not have agreed to her marrying Boaz because, according to Deuteronomy 23:3(4), Boaz’s and Ruth’s offspring would not have been able to enter the Temple of God for ten generations (see also Nehemiah 13:1).

On the other hand, there are those who say “no” to conversion because they hold that a Jew’s lineage that goes back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has to be physical, and covenant words can’t accomplish that. They also point to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7:20-24:

“Each person should remain in the condition he was in when he was called. Were you a slave when you were called? Well, don't let it bother you; although if you can gain your freedom, take advantage of the opportunity. For a person who was a slave when he was called is the Lord's freedman; likewise, someone who was a free man when he was called is a slave of the Messiah. You were bought at a price, so do not become slaves of other human beings. Brothers, let each one remain with God in the condition in which he was called.”

And there is also an in-between view of Jewish conversion, which is that conversion, while possible, should only be done in rare and specifically defined cases. Ohev Yisrael’s view is closest to this third line of reasoning, which is also Tikkun’s position. Ohev does not participate in the conversion process, but will acknowledge persons as Jewish proselytes if they have received their conversion through a reputable Jewish source.

Now, what about the matter of whether Messianic Judaism is, in reality, Christianity wrapped in a Jewish facade? That describes the Hebrew Christian movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries, but not the Messianic Jewish movement that arose from it; let me give you some of the history. Spurred by a zeal to save Jews through getting them to confess Jesus, Christian Missionary Societies and a few Christian churches began to sponsor Jewish-style worship

services (led by Jewish Christians) that met separately and at different times from the churches. The services contained a mixture of Jewish and Christian elements, and their purpose was to create an inviting Jewish environment (Jewish fly paper if you will) where Jews could be evangelized and later transitioned into a church. These Hebrew Christian leaders had no sense of the biblical importance of a Jew maintaining his or her covenantal Jewish identity, or of a Jew living a *Torah*-observant Jewish life. Hebrew Christianity was, at its inception, nothing more than an evangelistic ploy.

Over time, however, Jews who became believers in Jesus but remained comfortable with their Jewish life, resisted being assimilated, and began to notice things in the Bible that appeared to validate the importance of maintaining Jewish identity. This spawned a competing movement that they called “Messianic Judaism,” and it immediately came into conflict with those who were promoting Hebrew Christianity.

Messianic Judaism grew, developed congregationally, and in 1975 the Hebrew Christian Alliance of America that had previously published “We felt it is our duty to make it clear that we have nothing to do with this so-called ‘Messianic Judaism, in any shape or form ...’” changed its name from the “Hebrew Christian Alliance of America” to the “Messianic Jewish Alliance of America.” And from that point on, practically all Jews in Yeshua-believing Jewish congregations (not in the churches) referred to themselves as “Messianic Jews,” and to their religious expression as “Messianic Judaism.”

Messianic Judaism is not a comfortable religion of which to be a part because, whether we are Messianic Jews or Messianic Gentiles, we receive rejection from both Jewish quarters and Christian quarters alike. Rejection from traditional Jews because certain events in history have caused them to conclude that Christians are their persecutors; so, in their way of seeing it, Jews who come to believe in Yeshua have gone over to the enemy, and the Gentiles who join them are their accomplices. We also receive rejection from a goodly number of Christians because, throughout history, the Christian Church taught that those whose religious lifestyles were directed toward keeping the Mosaic Law in any manner were either backslidden, or they had never received the grace brought by Yeshua in the first place. These ways of thinking have even gone so far as to cause some parents (both Jewish and non-Jewish) to disown their children for joining Messianic Judaism.

That’s the bad news. The good news is that the bad news gives Messianic Judaism its ministry purpose and unique reason to exist. We believe that Messianic Jews and Gentiles are charged by God with the responsibility of bringing the Good News of Yeshua (including news of the New Covenant) to the Jewish people, and with helping the Christian Church return to its historic and biblically mandated connection to God’s covenant people Israel. The need for both of these ministries arose because of two wrongful rejections. The majority of the Jewish people rejected their Messiah, and the Christian Church rejected the Jews and made a Gentile out of theirs. One has only to read the Book of Romans to see how out-of-whack with God’s plan for humanity are both of these.

Now I would like to explain what we mean when we say that Messianic Judaism is “a Judaism,” and that our congregations are part of the wider Jewish community. In saying this, we don’t

mean that we can freely walk in on the events and activities of a Jewish community that doesn't accept us or want us; to do that would be arrogant and akin to committing trespass. What we mean is that we are part of "God's" wider Jewish community, which is the kingdom of priests and holy nation about which God spoke to Moses; in Exodus 19:5-6 God said:

"Now if you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenant, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although all the earth is Mine, and you will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation.' These are the words that you are to say to the Israelites."

When God spoke these words, He did not reveal to Moses that a Messiah would one day come that would cause a split in Judaism. God's words were for all members of the Kingdom of Israel for all time, and today that means all Jews regardless of their belief in Messiah, and all Gentiles who have been called by God to join them. Indeed, it is the Kingdom of Israel that is the wider Jewish community of which we are legitimately a part.

Sadly, we hear next to nothing from the traditional Jewish community about their being a kingdom of priests with priestly responsibilities, but they and we together are, nevertheless, exactly that. And by the way, if we are a kingdom of priests, to whom are we priests? The answer is in God's words to Abraham, recorded in Genesis 22:18:

"And all the nations of the earth will be blessed by your offspring because you have obeyed My command."

So, our priestly responsibility is not only to our Jewish people, but to all the Gentile peoples of the world.

Now a word about our being *Torah*-observant. That claim garners us criticism from both the Christian Community and the Jewish Community, so it bears some explanation. First, no one today – not Jews and not Gentiles – can say that they are "*Torah*-obedient" if what we mean by *Torah* is the entire Mosaic Law. During the time of Moses, conditions were such that every commandment of the Law could be obeyed literally. There was a Tabernacle. There was an altar and an ark in the Tabernacle. There were Levitical *Cohanim* to perform and mediate the required sacrifices. The Spirit of God dwelt in the ark, and the government of Israel, being directly under God, implemented and enforced the Mosaic Law in every particular.

Those are not the conditions that we have today. There is no Tabernacle or Temple. There is no altar or ark. There are no working Levitical *Cohanim* and, even if there were, conducting animal sacrifices for sin would be unauthorized because Yeshua's sacrifice in the first century replaced our need for them. What is more, if the *Ruach Hakodesh* on earth lives anywhere, He lives in us and not in an ark made of wood; and the secular governments under which we live feel no obligation at all to implement and enforce God's laws.

So, we cannot be "*Torah*-obedient," but we can be *Torah*-observant which means being knowledgeable of *Torah*, and making appropriate substitutions where needed. All the denominations of traditional Judaism make such substitutionary decisions, and Messianic Judaism does so as well. So why does our being *Torah*-observant get us into trouble with the

rest of the Jewish community? It is because the way we seek to keep *Torah* is Jewish, and they contend (albeit wrongly) that we are not. As for many in the Christian Church, it doesn't matter to them how we choose to observe God's Law – our mere attempt to do it is enough to cause a goodly number of church leaders to write us off as either backslidden Christians or un-regenerated Jews. Some days you just can't win!

Now this matter of our Messianic Jewish communities being *Torah*-observant requires further discussion because it is not without some controversy among ourselves. To begin with, we are not all Jews in our congregations, we are Gentiles as well. The Jews among us rightly feel an obligation to the *Torah* because the Law that was given through Moses was spoken to Israel and not to the Gentile nations. That notwithstanding, Deuteronomy 29:9-14 and 31:10-12 make it clear that the Mosaic Law (and indeed the Mosaic Covenant itself) were not only given to the Israelites, but also to the Gentiles who lived alongside them and were part of that early Jewish nation:

“Today you are standing, all of you, before *ADONAI* your God- your heads, your tribes, your leaders and your officers- all the men of Isra'el, along with your little ones, your wives **and your foreigners here with you in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water.** The purpose is that you should enter into the covenant of *ADONAI* your God and into his oath which *ADONAI* your God is making with you today, so that he can establish you today for himself as a people, and so that for you he will be God- as he said to you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Avraham, Yitz'chak and Ya'akov. But I am not making this covenant and this oath only with you. Rather, I am making it both with him who is standing here with us today before *ADONAI* our God and also with him who is not here with us today.” (Deuteronomy 29:9-14)

“Moshe gave them these orders: "At the end of every seven years, during the festival of *Sukkot* in the year of *sh'mittah*, when all Isra'el have come to appear in the presence of *ADONAI* at the place he will choose, you are to read this *Torah* before all Isra'el, so that they can hear it. **Assemble the people- the men, the women, the little ones and the foreigners you have in your towns- so that they can hear, learn, fear *ADONAI* your God and take care to obey all the words of this *Torah*;**” (Deuteronomy 31:10-12)

The Scriptures I have just read say some important things about to whom the *Torah* applies, and to whom it does not:

1. It applies to all Jews everywhere.
2. It applies to Gentiles who are called to be part of a Jewish community.
3. Except for the moral commandments, the *Torah* is not law to Gentiles who are not part of a Jewish Community.

By way of clarification, being called to be part of a Jewish community is more than just attending services and going home. A Gentile who is genuinely called to be part of a Jewish community is also called to follow the lifestyle of that community.

You may recall that I previously pointed out that, due to our new circumstances, none of us can obey the entire Mosaic Law literally, and we therefore have to make substitutions. Well then, how do we decide what substitutions to make? There can only be two ways:

1. We adhere to the traditions of the Jewish communities of which we are a part.
2. We pray, and ask the *Ruach Hakodesh* to direct us individually.

There is so much more to say, but I will close with some remarks about Ohev's apostolic covering organization – Tikkun. In the same way as there are several flavors of traditional Judaism, there are also several flavors within Messianic Judaism. Ohev Yisrael's is the Tikkun flavor, and you will not be surprised if I tell you that I think it is the best one. Here are some of the things that make Tikkun unique and best:

1. It provides rules for congregational governance.
2. It provides apostolic oversight of congregations and leaders.
3. It requires that congregational leadership be under a plurality of elders for safety.
4. It provides a process whereby congregational members can appeal upward from decisions and actions of their local leaders.
5. It maintains standards of biblical holiness to which local leaders are held accountable.
6. It promotes the gifts and power of the *Ruach Hakodesh* among its congregations and members.
7. It connects Ohev to other Messianic Jewish congregations, and to Jewish-rooted churches that hold similar values.
8. It enables the inter-congregational sharing of financial and leadership resources.
9. It gives Ohev a voice on the international stage, and connects us to Messianic Jewish congregations and ministries in Israel and elsewhere.

Who we are and what we are about! There is so much more to say, but we are out of time. If this message has perked your desire to know more about who we are and what we are about as Messianic Jews and Gentiles, please ask me or one of the elders, and we will be happy to discuss it with you at length.